

STAR
WARSTM



Jedi Apprentice Omnibus

Volume Two

Jude Watson



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Jedi Apprentice: The Uncertain Path
Jedi Apprentice: The Captive Temple
Jedi Apprentice: The Day of Reckoning
Jedi Apprentice: The Fight For Truth
Jedi Apprentice: The Shattered Peace
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Includes

Jedi Apprentice

Books Six Through Ten

STAR WARS Timeline



DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Crimson Empire
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24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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25-36 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

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36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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LEGACY

**40-139 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
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41 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Book Six
The Uncertain Path

Chapter One

Obi-Wan Kenobi paced between rows of tombs in a tunnel below the city of Zehava. Overhead, a battle raged. The noise of the explosions was muffled. But every time Obi-Wan heard the faint *thump* of a proton torpedo, he had to stop himself from wincing. His imagination supplied the damage the explosive device had inflicted. The enemy had starfighters, and the ground forces of the Young were being bombarded.

Around him, the shapes of other tombs loomed in the murky darkness. The Young had made their headquarters in the tunnels below the city. They had chosen the vaulted space of an ancient mausoleum as central headquarters.

"Obi-Wan, sit down," his friend Cerasi called. "You're making me dizzy."

In moments of crisis, Cerasi was always calm. Nield, a tall slender boy with dark eyes, was more serious. Obi-Wan could see the strain on their faces. He could not remember the last time any of them had eaten or slept.

They had been fighting aboveground for fourteen days. Now they waited for the news that seemed long in coming.

The three had led the Young on a quest to bring peace to the planet of Melida/Daan. Their war with the Elders was yet another war in the bloody history of Melida/Daan. The planet

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had been torn by conflict for centuries, as the two tribes, Melida and Daan, struggled for control. It was the Young who had finally called for peace. The Elders had refused, and now the children of Melida/Daan were battling to save their planet.

Obi-Wan had never believed in a cause more. He had forsaken his Jedi training because of it. After struggling to become Padawan to the great Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn, he had turned his back on him to battle for peace on a strange planet.

Sometimes, he could not believe that he'd made the decision. Then he would look at his friends and remember why he had done so. He had never felt as close to anyone as he did to Nield and Cerasi.

Cerasi's crystal green eyes gleamed in a face streaked with dirt and sweat. She patted a space on top of the tomb where she sat with Nield. "I'm sure Mawat will clear the tunnel to the spaceport any moment now," she assured Obi-Wan.

"He has to," Obi-Wan said worriedly as he took his place between them.

"We have to strike when the starfighters are being refueled. It's our only hope."

Obi-Wan had been the one to notice that the fleet of starfighters all attacked in the same wave. Most of the advanced weaponry on Melida/Daan had to be constantly retooled and refitted. The people had been fighting so long that equipment was worn out. The aging starfighters had to be refueled and checked more frequently. And the Elders' mistake was that they were refueling their entire fleet *at the same time*.

Which meant they were vulnerable.

Obi-Wan's plan was to invade the spaceport with a small team during the refueling process. While one member of the team disabled the power converters on the starfighters, the others would serve as lookouts. If a battle started, the first objective was to distract the guards.

It was risky, but if they were successful, victory would be assured.

STAR WARS: The Uncertain Path

Recently, the Middle Generation had offered their support to the Young. They would form an alliance, but only if victory was in sight. If the Young gained the support of the few who remained of the Middle Generation, the Elders would be outnumbered.

Mawat, the leader of the Scavenger Young, was now working to expand a small side tunnel into the spaceport's power shaft. From there they would be able to enter the port through a grate in the floor.

"All we need is timing and luck," Cerasi said.

Obi-Wan grinned. "Who, us? We don't need luck."

"Everybody needs luck," Nield shot back.

"Not us."

They held out their palms toward each other, their hands as close as they could without touching. The gesture was a ritual they'd developed through the many battles over the past weeks.

Suddenly, a small, slender girl rushed into the vault. "Mawat says we're clear."

"Thanks, Roenni," Obi-Wan said, springing to his feet. "Are you ready?"

She nodded and held up a pair of fusion-cutters. "I'm ready."

He hated to involve Roenni. She was younger and unused to battle, but her father had been a starfighter mechanic. She'd grown up around every kind of air transport available. She knew how to use a fusion cutter, and how to disable a power converter. Obi-Wan was counting on the fact that she was small and agile. She could slip into the starfighter through the cargo hold below. With any luck, she could do it without being seen.

Obi-Wan, Nield, Cerasi, and Roenni hurried through the tunnels. When they got to the new tunnel immediately beneath the spaceport, they moved more carefully. They were now directly below the guards.

Mawat came toward them. His lean face was completely covered in dirt and muck. His clothes were filthy.

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"Took longer because we had to work so quietly," he murmured to them.

"But, hey, you'll come up right behind the fueling tanks. Three of the starfighters are, *bang*, lined up next to them. Two are close to the entrance. There are two utility droids and six guards. At least, *blast*, they won't be expecting you to come from below."

Remember, Padawan, when you are outnumbered, surprise is your best ally.

Qui-Gon's calm voice entered Obi-Wan's mind, twining through his apprehension like a cool river. He felt a pang. He had never carried off an operation like this without his Master by his side.

Obi-Wan reached out to the Force. He would need it in this battle. But the Force slipped away from him like an unseen sea creature that brushed against him and then moved on. He could not reach it or summon it. He could only imagine its great power.

The Force had left him.

Leave you, the Force cannot. Constant, it is. If find it you cannot, look inside, not out, you must.

Yes, Yoda, Obi-Wan thought. Look inside, I should. But how can I when I'm in the middle of a war?

"Obi-Wan?" Cerasi touched his shoulder. "It's time."

Obi-Wan moved the grate aside carefully. He boosted Roenni up and then followed. Cerasi swung herself out with her usual agility. Nield clambered up a little clumsily, but without making a noise.

They crouched behind the fueling tanks. The utility droids, working busily to refuel the starfighters, didn't notice them. Nor did the guards, who stood at the entrance of the spaceport, their backs to the grate.

Obi-Wan nodded toward the first starfighter, and Roenni streaked across to climb inside through the cargo hold.

There were only five starfighters. Three were parked side by side. With luck, Roenni could disable them quickly and quietly.

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The trick would be to get to the last two, which were parked closer to the entrance... and the guards.

Cerasi, Nield, and Obi-Wan watched anxiously, their weapons at the ready, as Roenni ran from one starfighter to another. After the third, she poked her head out and gestured to the group. *What now?*

Obi-Wan leaned close to Cerasi and Nield. "I'll go with Roenni," he whispered. He did not want to send the girl across the expanse alone.

"Hopefully, the guards won't turn around. You cover us."

His friends nodded. Obi-Wan moved quietly past the three starfighters, keeping away from the utility droids. He reached Roenni's side. The girl's dark eyes were fearful as she looked at the space they would need to cross.

He squeezed her shoulder for reassurance, and she nodded with more confidence. They took off across the empty space, running quickly and silently.

They might have made it if a utility droid hadn't knocked into an empty fuel barrel. It rolled noisily across the floor and came to rest a few centimeters from their feet. One of the guards turned. Obi-Wan saw the surprise on his face as he registered the two invaders.

"Hey!" the guard called.

In the split second it took for the guard to fully recognize the threat, Obi-Wan was already moving. He gave Roenni a push toward the starfighters, then ran toward a stack of durasteel cargo boxes. He made an enormous leap and landed on top of them, then used the momentum to hurl himself at the guard. As blaster fire erupted around his head, he fervently wished he had his lightsaber. He had given it to Qui-Gon to take back to the Temple. Only the Jedi could carry lightsabers.

He could see the guard's mouth drop in surprise as Obi-Wan hurtled toward him, feet first. He knocked him down, then grabbed his blaster.

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The second guard turned just in time to see the first go down. Obi-Wan was already whirling, coming at the guard with a kick to the chin. The guard fell, cracking his head against the stone floor. His blaster rifle skidded away, and Obi-Wan jumped back toward Nield. Nield and Cerasi had already begun moving forward, firing at the guards.

The four remaining guards scattered. They were all wearing plastoid armor, but no one took chances with blaster fire. They fired as they ran, and Obi-Wan leaped back around the boxes for cover. Nield and Cerasi joined him a split second later.

"They've probably called for help on their comlinks," Cerasi said grimly as she took aim at the guards, who were crouching behind a pile of disabled floaters. She fired rapidly over one guard's head as he tried to take a clear shot.

Obi-Wan saw Roenni frantically signal from the starfighter. "We need to cover Roenni," he told the others. "Keep firing."

They kept up a rapid stream of blaster fire. Roenni scooted under the belly of one starfighter and leaped into the next.

"Last one," Obi-Wan said.

Two guards suddenly split off from the others and dashed to either side of the spaceport, ducking behind pillars for cover.

"They're trying to get behind us!" Obi-Wan alerted Cerasi and Nield.

Then he ran to the other end of the cargo boxes, keeping under cover. Roenni hadn't seen the guards' maneuver. She leaped down from the last starfighter at the same instant that the guard behind the pillar stepped out to fire.

Obi-Wan saw him catch sight of the young girl, whirl, and aim.

Desperately, Obi-Wan reached out for the Force. This time, he felt it surge around him. He put out his hand, and the blaster flew from the surprised guard's hand. The blaster fire went awry and pinged harmlessly into the wall.

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Roenni stood, paralyzed with fear. Obi-Wan dashed to her side while Cerasi and Nield kept up a barrage at the guards. Panic swirled in Roenni's eyes as she gazed at Obi-Wan.

"I'm right here." Obi-Wan locked eyes with her, hoping to drive away the fear. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Roenni's brown eyes cleared. Trust drove out fear. But Cerasi and Nield couldn't keep the guards down forever. They were exposed. Obi-Wan spotted the empty fuel drum the droid had knocked over. He reached out with the Force. Nothing.

Never gone. Always there, it is.

Obi-Wan groaned. You think so, Yoda? Not for me!

Blaster fire ripped into the fuselage of the starfighter over his head. Obi-Wan pushed Roenni down. Keeping his body bent over hers, he ran, hunched over, to the barrel. Not the greatest protection, but it would have to do.

"We're going to have to crawl," he told Roenni. "Keep yourself behind the barrel."

Roenni crawled in front of him as he pushed the barrel steadily toward Nield and Cerasi. Blaster fire pinged off the metal. Obi-Wan could feel Roenni shaking. When they reached the pile of cargo boxes, she slid behind them with relief.

Obi-Wan rolled the huge barrel toward the front guard. It smashed into his knees, and he fell backward into the guard behind him. They teetered into the line of fire of the other guards.

The four friends took advantage of the moment and ran, firing as they went. They reached the safety of the fuel tanks. Cerasi was the most nimble of them all. She hustled Roenni down, then followed. With a last blast, Nield jumped down. Obi-Wan slid through the opening, then threw out a timed explosive device.

"Run!" he yelled.

They all scrambled to safety - and then the tank exploded, taking most of the hangar with it.

"That should keep them busy," he told the others.

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Nield raised Mawat on the comlink. "It's done," he said. "The Elders have no starfighters anymore. You can contact the Middle Generation."

Mawat's voice crackled over the comlink. Though the transmission was faint, they could hear his glee.

"I think we just won the war!" he crowed.

Chapter Two

The lightsaber came down, missing him by millimeters. Qui-Gon jumped away, surprised. The blow came from nowhere. He hadn't been paying attention.

He whirled, raising his own lightsaber in defense. His opponent parried, then twisted away to come at him from his left. Their lightsabers tangled, buzzing. Suddenly, his opponent shifted his feet and moved right.

Qui-Gon hadn't expected the move, and his dodge was ill-timed. The lightsaber glanced against his wrist. The burn was nothing compared to his annoyance at himself.

"Round three, it is," Yoda called from the sidelines. "Approach from opposite corners, you should."

Qui-Gon wiped his forehead with his sleeve. When he had agreed to take part in a training exercise with the advanced Temple students, he hadn't expected to work so hard.

He could hear the murmur from the student onlookers as Bruck Chun bowed and retreated to his corner. Bruck was doing better than anyone had expected. He had made it through all six rounds with different opponents. This would be his final match.

Qui-Gon remembered Bruck from his last visit to the Temple. The white-haired boy had fought Obi-Wan in a tough, long match. The two boys were fierce rivals. They had fought out of

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fury at each other and a desire to win Qui-Gon's approval. Qui-Gon had been impressed with Obi-Wan's skills, but not with his anger. Watching Obi-Wan fight, Qui-Gon had been determined not to take the promising boy as his Padawan.

Why hadn't he listened to his instincts?

Qui-Gon wrenched his attention to the present moment. He must concentrate. Bruck's fighting skills had improved tremendously. The duel should have been easy for Qui-Gon, but he found his distraction harder to fight. Bruck had surprised Qui-Gon more than once. The boy fought doggedly, never tiring, and was quick to take advantage of Qui-Gon's lapses in concentration.

Bruck circled him, his lightsaber held in a defensive attitude. The training sabers were set on low power. A blow would cause a sting, not an injury. Blocks littered the floor to make the ground uneven. The lights were kept at half-power to add to the difficulty. A blow to the neck would declare the winner.

Qui-Gon watched, waiting for Bruck to make his next move. Bruck began to fade to the left. Qui-Gon noted how his hands tightened on his lightsaber. Impatience had always been Bruck's weakness, just as it was Obi-Wan's....

Was his former Padawan's impatience getting him in trouble back on the treacherous world of Melida/Daan?

Too late, Qui-Gon saw the flash of the lightsaber. Bruck had utilized a simple trick, a trick that never should have fooled him. He had reversed direction. The blow came down as Bruck leaped into the air, twisting to come at Qui-Gon's opposite side. The blow missed Qui-Gon's neck by a hair. Qui-Gon ducked, and took the blow hard on his shoulder. As he staggered, he heard the onlookers gasp.

He'd had enough of this. He was tired of his own inattention. It was time to end it.

Qui-Gon allowed his body to ease into his misstep, fooling Bruck. The boy came at him too eagerly, his balance off. Qui-Gon whirled and attacked. Bruck stumbled backward, surprised.

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He flailed at Qui-Gon with his lightsaber. Another mistake. Qui-Gon's next blow had all his weight behind it. Bruck nearly dropped his lightsaber.

Qui-Gon pushed his advantage. He attacked, his lightsaber now just a blur in the dusky light. Slashing, parrying, whirling to come at Bruck from yet another angle, then another, Qui-Gon forced the boy back into a corner. Now the murmurs he heard from the onlookers were of appreciation for the skill of a Jedi Master. Qui-Gon tuned them out. The battle was not over until the final defeat.

Bruck tried a last assault, but the boy was tired. It was not hard for Qui-Gon to knock Bruck's weapon from his hand and lightly touch the end of his own lightsaber to the boy's neck.

"End point, it is," Yoda announced.

The two exchanged the ritual bows and the customary eye contact. At the end of every match, each Jedi showed respect to the other and gratitude for his lesson, win or lose. Qui-Gon had fought many times in this way. Sometimes, Jedi students could not control their frustration or anger during the ritual bow. But in Bruck's steady gaze Qui-Gon saw only respect. That was an improvement.

But he saw other things. Curiosity. Desire.

Bruck was going to be thirteen in a few days. He had not yet been chosen as a Padawan. Time was running out. He was most likely wondering if Qui-Gon would choose him.

Everyone was wondering, Qui-Gon knew. Teachers, students, even the Council. Why had he returned to the Temple? Had he come to choose another apprentice?

Qui-Gon turned away from the speculation in Bruck's eyes. He would never choose a Padawan again.

He returned his lightsaber to his belt. Bruck replaced his in the rack where the senior students left their weapons after training. Qui-Gon quickly walked through the dressing and washing rooms and activated the door to the Room of a Thousand Fountains.

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He felt the coolness of the air with relief. Here in the enormous greenhouse it was always refreshing. The sound of rushing water and the many shades of green soothed a restless spirit. He could hear the trickle of the small fountains nestled in the ferns, as well as the gentle thunder of the larger waterfalls down the paths. Qui-Gon had always found the garden peaceful. He hoped that now it would calm his raging heart.

Privacy was greatly respected at the Temple.

Qui-Gon had not been confronted with questions since he'd arrived. Yet he knew that curiosity bubbled beneath the calm surface of the Temple just as the hidden fountains flowed in the gardens. Students and teachers alike wanted to know the answer to one question: What had gone wrong between him and his Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi?

Even if someone asked him the question, would he be able to answer it?

Qui-Gon sighed. The situation whirled with cloudy motivations and uncertain paths. Had he misjudged his Padawan? Had he been too firm with Obi-Wan? Not firm enough?

Qui-Gon didn't have an answer. All he knew was that Obi-Wan had made an astonishing and bewildering choice. He had thrown away his Jedi training like it was a worn-out tunic.

"Troubled you are, if the garden you seek," Yoda said from behind him.

Qui-Gon turned. "Not troubled. Just overheated from the battle."

Yoda gave a slight nod. He did not fully respond if he felt a Jedi had dodged an issue. Qui-Gon knew that well.

"Avoiding me, you have been," Yoda remarked. He settled himself on a stone bench placed near a fountain that ran over smooth white pebbles. The sound of the water was nearly music.

"I've been watching over Tahl," Qui-Gon answered.

Tahl was the Jedi Knight who Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had rescued from Melida/Daan. She had been blinded in an attack and then held as a prisoner of war.

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Again, Yoda only nodded slightly. "Better healers we have at the Temple than you," he said. "And in need of constant care, Tahl is not. Welcomes it not, I think."

Qui-Gon could not suppress a half smile. It was true. Tahl was already impatient with the constant attention. She didn't like to be fussed over.

"Time it is for you to speak your heart," Yoda said softly. "Past time, it is."

With a heavy sigh, Qui-Gon sat on the bench next to Yoda. He did not want to unburden his heart. Yet Yoda had a right to know the facts.

"He stayed," Qui-Gon said simply. "He told me he had found something on Melida/Daan that was more important than his Jedi training. On the morning we were leaving, the Elders attacked the Young. They had starfighters and weapons. The Young were disorganized. They needed help."

"And yet stay you did not."

"My orders were to return to the Temple with Tahl."

Yoda leaned slightly backward in surprise. "Orders, they were? Counsel, it was. And always willing to ignore my counsel you are, if suits you it does."

Qui-Gon gave a start. Obi-Wan had flung almost the same words at him back on Melida/Daan.

"Are you saying I should have stayed?" Qui-Gon asked irritably. "What if Tahl had died?"

Yoda sighed. "A hard choice it was, Qui-Gon. Yet willing are you to blame your Padawan. Place the choice before him you did: forsake Jedi training, or children die, friends are betrayed. Thought you understood a boy's heart, I did."

Qui-Gon stared stonily ahead. He had not expected this rebuke from Yoda.

"Impulsive you were yourself as a student," Yoda continued. "Led by the heart, many times you were. And wrong, many times you were as well. This I remember."

"I never would have left the Jedi," Qui-Gon said angrily.

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"True that is," Yoda said, nodding in agreement. "Commitment you had. Absolute it was. Does this mean that to question, others must not? Like you always, they must be?"

Qui-Gon shifted on the bench. These conversations with Yoda could be painful. The Jedi Master had a way of poking the deepest wound.

"So I should let him make his foolish decision," Qui-Gon said with a shrug. "Let him fight a war he can't win. Let him stand and watch the massacre that will result. He'll be lucky if he escapes with his life."

"Ah, see I do." Yoda's yellow eyes gleamed. "Unbiased by your feeling, your prediction is?"

Qui-Gon nodded shortly. "I see disaster there. The Young cannot win."

"Interesting," Yoda murmured. "For win they did, Qui-Gon."

Qui-Gon turned to him, startled.

"Word we have received," Yoda said calmly. "Won the war, the Young have. Forming a government, they are. Understand now do you, Obi-Wan's decision? Fighting for a lost cause, he was not. A planet ruler, he has become."

Hiding his surprise, Qui-Gon turned away. "Then he is more foolish than I thought," he coolly replied.

Chapter Three

Obi-Wan sat between Nield and Cerasi at a huge round conference table. The Young had taken over the bombed-out Melida/Daan Unified Congress Building. It had stood intact for only three years, during a period where the Melida and Daan had tried to rule together before war had broken out again.

The Young had taken it over as a symbolic gesture of unity. There were certainly more welcoming places they could have chosen. They had tried to clear most of the rubble, but they were forced to leave the heavier fallen beams and columns. The windows had been blown out, and more than half the roof was gone.

Obi-Wan was damp and cold and uncomfortable, but he was thrilled to be here, forming a new government. The days were long and difficult, but he never felt tired. There was so much to think about and so much to do.

The Young had won the war. But the hard part was just beginning. Before, they had all been in agreement. They had simply wanted peace. But now the Young waged a war of words among themselves. There were too many decisions to make and too many opinions.

The city of Zehava was a ruin. Many people did not have heat, and food was scarce. Hospitals needed supplies. Fuel for floaters

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and transports was low. But the worst problem was the amount of arms still carried by the citizens, most of them former soldiers. Tensions ran high, and any small conflict could escalate into a serious battle.

The Young were in the majority on Melida/Daan, especially since the decimated Middle Generation had thrown their support to them during the war. It had been easy to reach an agreement to elect Nield as temporary governor. In addition, an advisory council of ten members had been set up. Obi-Wan was on it, along with Mawat and other Young leaders. Cerasi headed the council. As governor, Nield was required to follow any motion that was voted by a majority. He cast one vote as well.

Nield and the council had gone to work immediately, forming squads to address the separate problems that Zehava faced. Obi-Wan was head of the Security Squad. It was the most dangerous duty, involving a house-to-house weapons sweep of the entire city. Until further notice, only members of the Security Squad were allowed to carry weapons. All others were directed to turn their weapons in to a warehouse until the tensions eased. Obi-Wan had not been surprised when many people did not want to cooperate. Even some of the Young were reluctant to hand over their weapons. They had all lived with conflict for too long.

The policy had been discussed at the first general meeting. There had been shouting and furious arguments.

Cerasi had faced them all down. She had stood in the middle of the ruined building and seemed to meet every eye in the packed house. "Peace isn't just a concept to me," she had said. "It is life and breath. I will never pick up a weapon again. I have seen what they can do. If a weapon of destruction is in my hands, sooner or later that weapon will be used. I will not contribute to one more death on Melida/Daan!"

After a silence, the Young had burst into cheers. Cerasi had flushed with happiness and pride as boys and girls streamed up to the council table and handed over their weapons. It had been a proud moment.

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"First order of business," Cerasi now said crisply, breaking into Obi-Wan's thoughts.

"Let's get progress reports from the squad heads. Nield, would you begin?"

Nield stood. He was head of the New History Squad, which was in charge of demolishing the symbols of hatred and division in Zehava - war monuments, military statues, and the great Halls of Evidence, which housed holograms of warriors telling tales of hatred and bloodshed.

"As you all know," Nield began in a ringing voice, "the building of a new society can only take place if the old rivalries are stamped out. How can the fragile peace hold if both Melida and Daan still have places to go to fuel their hatred? I say that the destruction of the Halls of Evidence should be our first priority!"

Many onlookers cheered. But Taun, the head of the Utilities Squad, in charge of bringing back power and heat to the many ruined buildings, raised his hand.

"The people are cold and hungry," he said. "Isn't helping them more important?"

"It's when they're cold and hungry that they blame the other side," Nield answered. "That's when the lines at the Halls of Evidence grow long. People would rather warm themselves with hatred than blankets."

"What about the med centers?" Dor, a quiet boy, spoke up. "The sick can't line up at the Halls. They need medicine."

"And the orphans?" someone else called. "The care centers can't handle the overflow."

"I would say that rebuilding housing is our first priority," Nena, the head of the Housing Squad, spoke up. "There are so many who were displaced by the war."

Nield suddenly brought his hand down on the table with a sharp crack. The buzz of conversation stopped.

"All of these problems come from the endless wars!" he cried. "And the endless wars spring from the endless hate! We *must*

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destroy the Halls first. It will give the people hope. Hope that we can bury the past as easily as we bury the symbols of our division!"

A hush fell on the room. Everyone stared at Nield. His words rang true.

"I know destroying the resting places of our ancestors is asking people to sacrifice their memories," Nield continued. "That is why I've chosen the resting place of my ancestors as the first Hall to be demolished. I want to remember my parents as *people*. Not warriors! I want to remember them with *love*. Not hate! Come with me now," he urged, leaning over the table, his voice carrying to every corner of the room. "Let me show you what a great mark of unity this will be. Are you with me?"

"We're with you!" the Young shouted.

Nield sprang up and strode down the center aisle. "Then come on!"

Boys and girls jumped up and ran behind him, cheering. Grinning, Obi-Wan and Cerasi followed.

"Nield will always be able to bring us together," Cerasi exclaimed, her face glowing.

The crowd followed Nield to the Daan sector, where a huge Hall of Evidence was located on a large, glittering blue lake. The low black structure hovered on repulsorlifts, covering almost the entire surface of the lake.

Already, workers from Nield's squad were carrying out the stone markers on small speeders. They dumped them in a growing pile.

Mawat waved Nield over as soon as the crowd arrived. "Hey, I made sure they saved these intact," he told Nield in a low voice. "I didn't know if you wanted to keep them."

Obi-Wan looked over at the stone markers. He saw the name Micae chiseled on one, with the warrior's birth and death dates. Next to it was a marker for Leidra. They were Nield's parents.

Nield looked down at the markers. "I'm glad you saved them," he murmured to Mawat.

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Obi-Wan exchanged a surprised glance with Cerasi. Would Nield reconsider his position now that he was face-to-face with the last evidence of his parents?

Nield caressed the golden globe that activated the projection. His father appeared in hologram form, brandishing a blaster and wearing armor.

"I am Micae, son of Terandi of Garth, from the North Country," the hologram began.

Nield turned and activated the hologram of his mother, Leidra. A tall woman with Nield's dark eyes appeared. "I am Leidra, wife of Micae, daughter of Pei of Quadri," she began.

The two voices combined, each drowning out the other. Obi-Wan could pick out isolated words and phrases about battles fought and won, ancestors dead, villages destroyed.

Nield picked up a beamdrill. Now the crowd had gathered around him. A solemn look was on his face as he turned to the marker for his father.

"I was but a boy when the evil Melida invaded Garth and herded my people into camps," Micae was saying. "There -"

Nield attacked the marker with the beamdrill, shattering it into pieces. The hologram dissolved into glittering fragments, then disappeared.

Only the voice of Nield's mother remained.

"And to my son, Nield, my treasure, my hope, I leave my love and my undying hatred for the filthy Melida -"

Leidra's voice was cut off as Nield set to work on her marker. The hologram wavered, then dissolved. The harsh sound of the beamdrill filled the air. Stone splintered and chips flew, cutting Nield on his arms. He didn't seem to feel it. He operated the drill until his parents' markers were ground to small chunks of stone.

"Now they are gone forever," Cerasi whispered. Obi-Wan saw a small tear trickle down from the corner of her eye.

Nield turned. He wiped the sweat from his brow with a forearm. Blood from his cuts mingled with the dust covering his

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face. He leaned down to pick up one of the chunks of stone. He held it aloft.

"The remnants of these stones will be used to build new housing for Melida and Daan to live together in peace," he shouted. "Today, a new history is born!"

A great roar rose from the crowd. Many rushed into the Hall to help dismantle it. Others hoisted pieces of stone and cheered.

Obi-Wan stood next to Nield and Cerasi. It was a historic moment. He had helped to shape it.

He had no regrets about leaving the Jedi. He was home.

Chapter Four

Qui-Gon was in his quarters when he got the message that he was to report to the Jedi Council immediately. He was most likely being called to report on what had happened with Obi-Wan.

He rose with a sigh. He had returned to the Temple for peace. Instead, he was forced to relive the situation over and over.

Still, a request from the Council could not be ignored. Part of being a Jedi was recognizing that one's own wisdom had limits. The Council was made up of the wisest and best of the Jedi Masters. If they wanted to hear from Qui-Gon directly, he would tell them.

Qui-Gon entered the Council room. It was the highest room in one of the Temple towers, taking up the entire top story. Outside the windows that ran from floor to ceiling, the spires and towers of Coruscant hovered below. The sun was just rising, brushing the clouds with orange fire.

Qui-Gon stood in the center of the room, bowed respectfully, and waited. How would they begin? Would Mace Windu, whose dark eyes could burn through you like hot coals, demand his reason for leaving a thirteen-year-old boy in the middle of a war? Would Saesee Tiin murmur that Qui-Gon's actions had always come from an impulsive but giving heart? He had been called

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before the Council more than most Knights. He could guess at what each would say.

Yoda began the meeting. "Call you here on a matter of grave importance we have. Secret it is. A series of thefts we have discovered."

Qui-Gon was startled. He had not been prepared for this. "Here at the Temple?"

Yoda nodded. "Sorry I am to report such a thing. Taken are things that do not have monetary value. Yet serious the thefts are. Against the Jedi Code, they are."

"Does the Council believe that a student is responsible?" Qui-Gon asked, frowning. Such a thing was unheard of at the Temple.

"This we do not know," Yoda replied.

"If it is not, then some outside force has invaded the Temple. Either possibility is intolerable," Mace Windu put in. "And both must be investigated." He knit his long, elegant fingers together. "That is why we've called you here, Qui-Gon. We need to investigate discreetly. We don't want to alarm the youngest students, or tip off the thief. We'd like you to take charge of the investigation."

"Work with Tahl, you will," Yoda added. "True it is that she cannot see. But remarkable are her powers."

Qui-Gon nodded. He agreed with Yoda. Tahl's intuition and intelligence were renowned.

"The thefts may seem small for now," Mace Windu warned. "But a small threat can be a hint of a greater threat to come. Either from within or without, this threat is real. Take care, Qui-Gon."

"Yes, I heard," Tahl told Qui-Gon when he came to see her in her quarters. "Yoda came to see me this morning. Woke me up with bad news. Not my favorite way to start the day."

Tahl gave an ironic half smile, one that Qui-Gon knew well. They had gone through Temple training together. Tahl had

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always attracted notice. Strong and beautiful, with skin the color of dark honey and striped green and gold eyes, Tahl and her sharp tongue had deflated pride and exposed bullies, even as a six-year-old.

Now when he saw her sightless eyes and the white scar that ran from her left eyebrow to her chin, Qui-Gon's heart contracted in pain. Tahl was still gloriously beautiful, but it hurt to see the visible signs of how she had suffered.

"I heard the healers were with you yesterday," Qui-Gon remarked.

"Yes, that was another reason that Yoda came to me. He wanted to make sure I was all right," Tahl said. The half smile quirked a corner of her mouth. "Yesterday I was told that I would never have sight again."

The bad news made Qui-Gon slowly sink down into a chair next to her. He was glad she could not see the pain on his face. "I'm sorry." He had been hoping, along with Tahl, that the healers on Coruscant would be able to restore her sight.

She shrugged. "Yoda came to tell me I was needed on this investigation. I think that our friend gave me this assignment so that I can turn my mind to other things."

"If you would rather not, I can find another partner," Qui-Gon said. "The Council will understand."

She gave his hand a pat and reached for the teapot. "No, Qui-Gon. Yoda is right, as he always is. And if there is a threat to the Temple, I want to help. Now have some tea." She felt the pot. "It's still warm."

"Let me," Qui-Gon said quickly.

"No," Tahl said sharply. "I must do things for myself. If we're going to work together, you have to understand that."

Qui-Gon nodded, then realized she couldn't see him. He would have to get used to this new Tahl. She might have lost her sight, but her perception was stronger than ever.

"All right," he said mildly. "I'd like some tea."

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Tahl reached out for a cup. "Don't you know what I've been up to these past weeks? Training exercises. I'm working with the Masters to develop my hearing, sense of smell, and touch. I've already made some remarkable progress. I had no idea how sharp my hearing could be."

"And here I thought it was your tongue that was sharp," Qui-Gon said.

She laughed as she steadied the cup with one hand and began to pour. "And Yoda arranged a surprise for me. An unwelcome surprise, I must say, but don't ever tell him. He -"

"One centimeter to the left!" A musical voice rang out from behind them suddenly. Startled, Tahl spilled the tea on her wrist.

"Stars and galaxies!" she cried.

Qui-Gon handed her a napkin. He turned to see a droid roll into the room. It had the silver body shell of a protocol droid, but Qui-Gon could see that other features had been included. Extra sensors were built into the head, and the arms were longer. Now they shot out and took the cup from Tahl.

"You see, Master Tahl, you spilled the tea," the droid said.

"I spilled it because you startled me, you hunk of recycled tin," Tahl sputtered. "And don't call me Master Tahl."

"Yes, certainly, sir," the droid replied.

"I'm not a sir. I'm a female. Who's the blind one here?"

Qui-Gon tried to hide his grin. "What's this?" he asked, indicating the droid.

"Meet Yoda's surprise," Tahl said with a grimace. "2JTJ, but call it TooJay. It's a personal navigation droid. It's supposed to help me with domestic matters until I can navigate alone. It scans for obstructions and I can program it to lead me to any destination."

"Seems like a good idea," Qui-Gon remarked as TooJay efficiently cleaned up the spill and poured more tea.

"I'd rather walk into walls," Tahl grumbled. "It's thoughtful of Yoda, but I'm not used to having a constant companion. I never did take a Padawan."

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Qui-Gon sipped his tea. Once he had felt as Tahl did. He hadn't wanted a Padawan after his first, Xanatos, had destroyed every bond of honor and loyalty between them. He enjoyed being alone. He liked being responsible for only himself. Then Obi-Wan had come into his life. He had grown used to having him there.

"I'm sorry, Qui-Gon," Tahl said gently. "That was a careless remark. I know you miss Obi-Wan."

Carefully, Qui-Gon set down his cup. "If I am not to help you pour the tea, then can I request that you not tell me how I am feeling?"

"Well, perhaps you don't know that you miss him," Tahl said. "But you do."

Annoyed, Qui-Gon stood. "Do you forget what he did? He stole the starfighter to destroy those deflection towers. If he had been shot down, you would have died on Melida/Daan!"

"Ah, so you have a new talent. You can see things that might have been. Must come in handy."

Qui-Gon paced in front of her. "He would have stolen it again, if I hadn't stopped him. He would have left us on that planet with no way to get off."

Tahl pushed Qui-Gon's chair out with her foot. "Sit down, Qui-Gon. I can't see you, but you're making me nervous. If I don't blame Obi-Wan, why should you? It's my life you're talking about."

Qui-Gon didn't sit, but he did stop pacing. Tahl cocked her head, trying to gauge his mood.

"It was a tough call," she said in a gentler tone. "You went one way, Obi-Wan another. It seems to me that you're the only one who continues to blame the boy. And he is a boy, Qui-Gon. Remember that."

Qui-Gon was silent. Once again, he found himself discussing Obi-Wan. And he didn't want to discuss his Padawan with Tahl, or even Yoda. No one knew how much of himself he had

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invested in the boy in such a short time. No one knew how Obi-Wan's decision had grieved him.

"Maybe we should talk about the investigation," he said finally. "It's a high priority. We're wasting time."

"True," Tahl said, nodding. "I think the Council is right. We can't treat this lightly. There is danger here."

"Where should we start?" Qui-Gon asked, sitting down. "Do you have any ideas?"

"One of the thefts was in a semi-restricted area," Tahl pointed out. "Some student records are missing. Let's see who has access to the Temple registry. When you don't know where to begin, the obvious is a good place to start."

Chapter Five

Obi-Wan strapped a blaster to his hip and made sure his vibroblade was in its holster. He had received a report of holdouts in the Melida sector who had refused to turn over their weapons.

He, Cerasi, and Nield were still living in the Young's underground vault until accommodations could be found. It wouldn't be right to take housing when so many were without. He walked out into the main vault where his Security Squad waited. He nodded at Deila, his second in command. They were ready.

They climbed up a ladder to a grate and hoisted themselves onto the street. They had gone only a few steps when Obi-Wan heard the sound of running footsteps behind him. He turned and saw Cerasi.

"I heard about the holdouts," she said as she ran up, fastening her warm hooded tunic. "I'm coming with you."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Cerasi, this could be dangerous."

Her green eyes glinted. "Oh, and the war we fought together wasn't?"

"You don't carry a weapon," Obi-Wan said, exasperated. "There could be shooting."

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"Relax, Obi-Wan," Cerasi said, buckling a thick belt around her waist. "I have my own bag of tricks."

Despite his worry, Obi-Wan couldn't help smiling. Cerasi had devised a number of trick "weapons." They were slingshots that gave off the sound of blaster fire.

"All right," he agreed. "But for once, follow my orders, will you?"

"Yes, Captain," Cerasi teased.

It was a cold day, and their breath mingled as it clouded the air. They passed a square where some members of the New History Squad were busy dismantling a war monument. A group of Melida Elders watched, their faces stony.

"They expect us to put up monuments to ourselves, I hear," Cerasi said. "I can't wait to surprise them. No more war memorials on Melida/Daan."

"Are you sure?" Obi-Wan asked with a straight face. "I can see you up on a pedestal holding up your slingshot -"

Cerasi nudged him with her shoulder. "Watch it, friend." She grinned at him. "I didn't know Jedi were allowed to joke."

"Of course we are." Obi-Wan's face flushed. "I mean, they are." He spoke lightly, but a shadow must have crossed his face because the smile left Cerasi's lips.

"You gave up so much for us," she said sadly.

"And look what I received," Obi-Wan replied, swinging his arm to encompass Zehava.

Laughter bubbled out from Cerasi. "Sure. A destroyed city, bad food, no heat, a home in a tunnel, a job disarming fanatics, and -"

"Friends," Obi-Wan finished.

Cerasi smiled. "Friends."

The large, two-story building where some of the Melida holdouts were living seemed peaceful under the sharp blue sky. It looked perfectly intact from the front, but as they carefully circled it, keeping out of sight, they saw that the back had been

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completely demolished. A repair job had been attempted with a combination of boards and tough plastoid sheets.

There was one thing odd about the house, Obi-Wan noted. There was no back door. He pointed it out to Cerasi.

"Only one entrance to defend," she said, squinting up at the roof. "That way we can't surprise them."

"I don't want to surprise them," Obi-Wan said. "I have to give them the chance to surrender their arms. I can't go in shooting." He looked at the house, his hand drifting toward his belt. It was still a surprise to feel a vibroblade there instead of a lightsaber.

"We need a lookout on the street," Obi-Wan continued. "That's you."

For a moment, Cerasi seemed about to protest. Then she nodded. She held out her hand, palm out. Obi-Wan put his up against hers, as close as he could without touching. "Good luck."

"We don't need luck."

"Everybody needs luck."

"Not us."

Obi-Wan ducked around the corner, followed by his squad of six boys and girls, the best fighters the Young had.

He knocked on the door. He heard movement behind it, but nothing happened. He leaned closer to the door and shouted, "We are the Young Security Squad. You are ordered by the acting governor of Melida/Daan to open the door."

"Come back when your voice changes," someone shouted from inside.

Obi-Wan sighed. He had been hoping for cooperation. He nodded at Deila, their explosives expert. She quickly set explosive charges near the lock of the heavy door.

"Stand back from the door," she shouted to those inside.

The Security Squad had done this before. Many Melida and Daan Elders would not open their doors to them or recognize their authority. This was a quick way to show them who was in charge. No lives were lost - just doors.

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Deila motioned to all of them to step back, then set the charge and jumped back with them. A muffled *boom* split the silence. The door shook. Deila stepped forward and nudged it with a toe. It fell with a loud *thud*, and the Security Squad rushed in, with Obi-Wan leading the charge.

At first, he couldn't see anything. But he hadn't forgotten his Jedi training. He let go of the urgent need to see and accepted the darkness. In only seconds, he could make out shapes.

Shapes with weapons...

The Melida Elders stood at the end of the long hallway. Their backs were to a stairway leading upward. They all wore battered plastoid armor and held their weapons pointed at the squad.

Obi-Wan saw his problem at once. He would have to end the conflict here. The group had access to the stairway. More lives could be lost if his squad was forced to follow them upstairs. There could be booby traps. At the very least, it would be a dangerous exercise to try to locate all six Elders upstairs.

One of them spoke. "We do not recognize your authority."

Obi-Wan knew the voice. It belonged to Wehutti, Cerasi's father. Cerasi had not seen him in years. Obi-Wan was glad that she was outside.

"It doesn't matter if you don't recognize it," Obi-Wan answered in a steady tone. "We have it. You lost the war. We've formed a new government."

"I do not recognize your government!" Wehutti cried sharply. His powerful hand gripped a blaster. He had lost his other arm in an earlier war, but Obi-Wan had seen firsthand that Wehutti could inflict more damage with one arm than most warriors could with two.

"Young fools!" Wehutti continued harshly. "You talk of peace with weapons in your hands! You are no different from us. You wage war to get what you want. You oppress the people to keep what you have. You are hypocrites and fools. Why should we bend to your authority?"

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Obi-Wan began to walk forward. His squad followed him. "Drop your weapons or we'll arrest you. We've called for reinforcements."

At least he hoped so. The standard operating procedure was for the last one in to signal the lookout to call if it looked as if there would be resistance. Cerasi should have contacted Mawat on her comlink by now.

"If you take another step, Jedi, I'll fire," Wehutti said, leveling his blaster.

Before Obi-Wan could take his next step, blaster fire erupted from upstairs. Obi-Wan sprang backward to avoid it, but he couldn't see where it was coming from.

Wehutti sprang backward as well. That meant that he didn't know where it was coming from, either.

Cerasi! Somehow she had climbed into the upper story. Cerasi was an agile, fearless gymnast. She had pulled what she called a "rooftop special," jumping from an adjoining roof onto another and then swinging down to a window.

Obi-Wan took advantage of Wehutti's surprise and launched himself at the group, his squad on his heels. He leaped into the air, twisting his body in order to bring the hilt of his vibroblade down on Wehutti's wrist. Even a powerful man like Wehutti couldn't withstand the shock of such a blow. He howled and dropped his blaster.

Obi-Wan scooped it up as he whirled to disarm the next Elder. He saw a flash of movement behind him. It was Cerasi, leaping over the stairway rail into the fray. She dove feet-first into a Melida Elder. The Elder's vibro-ax clattered to the floor, and Deila picked it up.

Within thirty seconds, the entire group was disarmed.

"Thank you for your cooperation," Obi-Wan said. It had been decided that if resisters were disarmed without any loss of life, no one would be arrested. If they had to arrest every resister, Nield pointed out, they would have no place to put them.

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"A curse on the foul Youth who destroy our civilization!" Wehutti spat out. His green eyes were similar in color to Cerasi's, but they blazed with hate.

Cerasi stood rooted to the spot, transfixed by her father's hatred. He had not recognized the slight figure in the brown cloak and hood.

Obi-Wan tugged on her arm, and she followed him outside. The cold air cooled their flushed cheeks.

"Deila, take the weapons back to the warehouse," Obi-Wan said wearily. "We'll take a break for now."

Deila waved. "Good work, chief."

The rest of the squad headed off. Cerasi walked in silence next to Obi-Wan for a few minutes. It was cold, and they tucked their hands inside their cloaks for warmth.

"I'm sorry I didn't call for reinforcements," Cerasi said. "I figured we could handle it."

"Did you know Wehutti was there?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Not for sure. But when I hear about a bunch of stubborn angry Melida holdouts, naturally my dear dad springs to mind."

Cerasi tilted her face back to catch the warming rays of the sun. She looked serene, but Obi-Wan had picked up the sad bitterness in her voice.

"He is wrong," Obi-Wan admitted quietly. "But he knows no other way."

"I was stupid enough to think this war would change him." Cerasi stooped down to pick up a piece of rubble in her path. She threw it into a pile at the side of the road and tucked her hand inside again. "I thought if we survived the last war we'd ever fight on Melida/Daan, we'd find each other again. Stupid."

"Not stupid," Obi-Wan said carefully. "Maybe it just hasn't happened yet."

"It's funny, Obi-Wan," Cerasi said thoughtfully. "I had no empty places inside me during the war. I was filled up with my desire for peace, my friendships with the Young. Now we have victory, and my heart feels empty. I didn't think I would miss my

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family ever again. But now I want something to connect to that goes as deep as blood."

Obi-Wan swallowed. Cerasi continually surprised him. Every time he thought he knew her, another layer would peel back, and he would see a different person. He had met a tough, angry girl who could shoot and fight almost as skillfully as a Jedi. After the war, he had seen an idealist emerge with the power to move hearts and minds. Now he saw a young girl who just wanted a home.

"You connect to me, Cerasi," he said. "You've changed me. We support each other and protect each other. That's family, right?"

"I guess."

He stopped and turned to face her. "We'll be each other's family." He held up his hand. This time, she pressed her palm against it.

The wind picked up, cutting through their cloaks and making them shiver. Still, they kept their palms together. Obi-Wan felt the warmth of Cerasi's skin. He could almost feel the beating of her blood against his.

"You see," he said, "I have lost everything, too."

Chapter Six

A tool box from the servo-utility unit

Holographic files and computer records for students with names A through H

A teacher's meditation robe

A fourth-year student's sports activity kit

Qui-Gon stared at the list. It was such an odd assortment of items. He could see no pattern there. He and Tahl were working on the assumption that these were petty thefts. That would be the easy answer. Somewhere there could be a student who seemed to be adjusting but who was hiding resentment or anger. He or she had lashed out.

But Qui-Gon had learned through long experience that the easy answer usually just led to a harder question.

The holographic files on the students were kept by Jedi Master Tun. Tun had a record of long years of service. He was several hundred years old, a wizened being of great learning. He had kept the records of the Temple for the past fifty years. Each year he was aided by two student helpers who volunteered for service. Tahl and Qui-Gon had interviewed both of them. They had answered steadily and clearly. Only Tun and other members

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of the Council had access to the private files. The students were never alone in the filing office without Tun.

It was typical of their investigation. Every lead had turned into a dead end.

An urgent knock came on his door. "Qui-Gon," Tahl called softly. "I need you."

He opened the door. "More bad news," she said with an anxious frown. "The senior training rooms have been vandalized. All of the lightsabers have been stolen."

Dismay made him slow to respond. Obi-Wan's lightsaber had been in the senior training room. Qui-Gon had left it there. Part of him had hoped that someday Obi-Wan would reclaim it.

"This is no longer petty theft," he said.

"Yoda has cordoned off the room until we see it," Tahl explained. "Hurry, before TooJay catches up with me."

They walked quickly to the lift tube and took it to the training floor. Qui-Gon strode into the changing rooms. He stopped short, and Tahl bumped into him from behind.

"What is it?" she asked. "What do you see?"

Qui-Gon couldn't answer for a moment. Sick at heart, he surveyed the room. Training tunics had been ripped to shreds, the pieces flung around the room. Lockers were flung open, their contents spilled onto the floor.

"I can feel it," Tahl said. "Anger. Destruction." She picked her way through the debris, reaching down to pick up a scrap of fabric. "What else?"

"A message," Qui-Gon said. "Scrawled on the wall in red." He read it to her.

COME, YOUR TIME WILL
BEWARE YOU MUST, TROUBLE I AM

"It's mocking Yoda," she said. "I know the students imitate him sometimes. Even I do. But we do it with great affection. Qui-Gon, there is hate here."

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"Yes."

"We have to get to the bottom of this. And the students must know. We must go on alert."

"Yes," he agreed. "This cannot be secret any longer."

The Temple went on high-security alert. It was a decision the Council was reluctant to make. It made prisoners out of the students. They needed passes to leave the Temple, passes to use the gardens and to swim in the lake. They needed to account for their time at every minute of the day. It was for everyone's protection, but it violated the spirit of the Temple. The Temple's philosophy was that discipline needed to come from within. Security checks contradicted that concept.

But Qui-Gon and Tahl had insisted on the measure, and Yoda had agreed. The safety of the students was their primary concern.

An atmosphere of mistrust grew at the Temple. Students eyed each other with suspicion. As they were called into interviews with Qui-Gon and Tahl, they watched each other for guilty signs. Yet no one could believe that a student could be capable of such vandalism.

Bruck was one such student. "I know it can't be any of the senior students," he told Tahl and Qui-Gon quietly when they called on him. "We have been through training together. I can't imagine any one of us wanting to damage the Temple."

"It's hard to see into another person's heart," Qui-Gon remarked.

"I was the last person to leave the training rooms last night," Bruck said. "And of course you know that months ago I was disciplined for my anger. I've worked with Yoda, and I've made progress. But I guess I'm still a suspect." Bruck met Qui-Gon's gaze steadily.

"We suspect no one as yet," Tahl assured him. "Did you see anything odd last night? Think carefully."

Bruck closed his eyes for a long moment. "Nothing," he said finally. "I powered down the lights, and I left. We never lock the

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training rooms. I took the turbolift to the dining hall. I was with my friends all evening until bed."

Qui-Gon nodded. He had already confirmed Bruck's story. He and Tahl weren't even certain what they were looking for. They were merely gathering information, trying to see if the students had seen anything out of the ordinary, even if it didn't seem to be important at the time.

They dismissed Bruck, and Tahl turned to Qui-Gon with a sigh. "I think he's right. I can't imagine any of the senior students doing this. They are Jedi."

Qui-Gon passed a weary hand over his forehead. "And no one has heard of a student who has recently been angry or upset. Just the usual things - a bad performance on an exercise, or a petty disagreement..." He drummed on the table, thinking. "Yet Bruck was angry once."

"Yoda says he's made great improvements," Tahl said. "And Bruck acknowledged his problem used to be anger. He admitted it must look bad for him that he was the last one to use the room. I got no sense of darkness from him. A boy so honest couldn't have done this."

"Unless he was very, very clever," Qui-Gon remarked.

"Do you suspect him?"

"No," Qui-Gon said. "I suspect no one and everyone..."

"Master Tahl!" TooJay suddenly appeared in the doorway of the interview room. "I am here to lead you to the dining hall."

Tahl gritted her teeth. "I'm busy."

"It is dinnertime," TooJay said in a musical tone.

"I can find it," Tahl snapped.

"It is five levels down -"

"I know where it is!"

"There is a datapad three centimeters to your left -"

"I know! And in another second, it will be flying at your head!"

"I see you are busy. I will return." TooJay beeped at them in a friendly way, and scooted off.

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Tahl dropped her head in her hands. "Remind me to get a pair of vibro-cutters, will you, Qui-Gon? I really need to dismantle that droid." With a heavy sigh, she raised her head. "This investigation will try the nerves of everyone at the Temple. I feel a serious disturbance in the Force."

"I do as well."

"I fear it is not a student who is doing this. I think it's an invader. Someone who hates us. Someone who wants to see us fractured and distracted..."

"Someone who could have a larger plan in mind, you mean? Is that what you're afraid of?"

Tahl turned her worried emerald and gold eyes to him. "It is what I fear the most," she said.

"As do I," Qui-Gon softly replied.

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan walked through the city streets, exhausted. He had just finished three solid days of Security Squad duty. It had been hard, but they had managed to disarm whole quadrants of the city. There were only isolated pockets left. Most of the weapons had been collected. They were stored in a heavily guarded warehouse. It would be safer to get them out of the city completely until the council decided whether to destroy them. He needed to bring up the issue at the next council meeting.

A few flakes of snow trickled down from a metallic sky. Winter was almost upon them. People needed fuel for the upcoming months. Nothing had been done about it yet.

Instead, Nield had recruited more and more workers on his mission to destroy every Hall in the city. Since Obi-Wan was on the streets most of the time, he had seen the anger of the people. They had turned from thoughts of war to thoughts of survival. The Young were not helping them rebuild their homes or feed their families. The unrest was growing. The Middle Generation had helped them win the war, but the Young were losing their support. What they lacked in numbers they made up in influence. The Young couldn't afford to alienate them.

We must do something, Obi-Wan thought.

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He saw a group of Scavenger Young hurrying down a side street with a sense of purpose. Obi-Wan called to one of them.

"Joli! What's going on?"

A short, stocky boy turned. "Mawat called us. Another Hall of Evidence going down today. The one on Glory Street near the plaza." He hurried on after the others.

Obi-Wan felt a pang. That Hall of Evidence held the holograms and markers of Cerasi's ancestors. He remembered how wistful she'd been about her lack of family. Perhaps he should let her know what was about to happen.

He forgot his weariness as he hurried to the tunnels. He climbed down the grate near the mausoleum and hurried into the vaulted space. Cerasi sat at the scrubbed tomb the Young had used as a meeting table.

"I heard," she told Obi-Wan.

His steps slowed as he approached her. "We can ask Nield to stop--"

Cerasi brushed a strand of her short coppery hair out of her eyes. "That wouldn't be fair, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan sank down on a stool next to her. "When was the last time you went to the Hall?"

Cerasi sighed. "I can't remember. Before I came down into the tunnels.... Long enough so that I can't really remember my mother's face. Her memory is fading." She turned to Obi-Wan. "I believe that Nield is right. I hate the Halls of Evidence as much as he does. Or at least I did. But I don't hate my family, Obi-Wan. My mother, my aunts, my uncles, the cousins I've lost... they're all there. Their faces, their voices... I don't have any other way to remember them. And I'm not alone. So many on Melida/Daan have nothing to remember their loved ones by except the Halls of Evidence. We've bombed our homes and libraries and civic buildings... we have no records of births and marriages and deaths. If we destroy all the holograms, our history will be lost forever. Will we end up missing part of what we destroy?"

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Cerasi's keen eyes searched his, but he had no answers for her.

"I'm not sure," he said slowly. "Maybe Nield is being too rash. Maybe the holograms should be preserved somehow. Say in a vault that can only be accessed with permission. That way we wouldn't be encouraging the worship of war or violence, but scholars could have access, and we'd retain the history of Melida/Daan."

"That's a good idea, Obi-Wan," Cerasi said excitedly. "It's a compromise. And it's something to offer the people of Zehava."

"Why don't we persuade Nield to stop temporarily until we can figure this out?"

The excitement in Cerasi's eyes dimmed. "He won't," she said flatly.

"The council of advisors could issue a stop action on Nield's squad until further debate and study can be done. We have that power. Nield would have to go along."

Cerasi bit her lip. "I don't think I can do that. I can't oppose Nield officially. It would split the Young in two. We need to act together. If the Young is divided, that's the end of peace on Melida/Daan. I can't risk that."

"Cerasi, the city is falling apart," Obi-Wan said urgently. "The people want their lives back. *That's* the way peace will remain. If Nield concentrates on destruction instead of rebuilding, the people will revolt."

Cerasi dropped her head in her hands. "I don't know what to do!"

Mawat suddenly rushed into the chamber. "Hey, Obi-Wan!" he called. "We need you!"

Obi-Wan sprang to his feet. "What is it?"

"Wehutti has organized the Elders to protest the destruction of the Hall on Glory Street," Mawat said. "Yes, there's a huge crowd forming. I need you, now, to authorize the release of weapons to the Young. We must defend our right to demolish the Halls!"

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Obi-Wan shook his head. "I'm not releasing any weapons, Mawat. That could turn a protest into a massacre."

Mawat pushed his hands through his long, sandy hair in frustration. "But we're unarmed, thanks to you!"

"Thanks to the unanimous decision of the council," Cerasi rapped out. "Obi-Wan is right."

Disgusted, Mawat turned away. "Hey, thanks for nothing."

"Wait, Mawat!" Obi-Wan called. "I said I wouldn't give you weapons. I didn't say I wouldn't give you help."

Chapter Eight

The rumor spread through the Temple like wildfire. An intruder had been spotted on the grounds. Some said he or she had been seen in the Temple itself. The youngest students were afraid, and even the Jedi Knights were apprehensive. The Temple was on high-security alert. How could someone violate it? Was the Temple vulnerable?

"The Temple's security is tight," Qui-Gon told Tahl as they walked through the halls on a survey, TooJay ahead of them. "But perhaps it relies too much on closing down if a threat is out there."

"Meaning?" Tahl asked.

"Meaning, there are not as many systems operating to protect us if there is someone on the inside who *wants* the intruder to enter. The system assumes that no Jedi would welcome an outside threat."

"Ramp, incline fifteen degrees, two meters ahead," TooJay trilled.

Tahl's face tightened with annoyance for a moment, but she returned to Qui-Gon's statement. "We don't even know if there's an intruder at all," she said, frustrated. "We've tried to track the story to its source, and it's impossible. This one told that one,

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who heard it from this one, who doesn't remember who told him..."

"It's the nature of a rumor to be difficult to track," Qui-Gon offered. "Perhaps the intruder is counting on that. Perhaps he or she *wants* us to think an invasion has occurred."

A voice came over the address system. "Code fourteen, code fourteen," the calm, steady voice intoned.

"Yoda's signal," Tahl said. "Something's happened."

The two Jedi Knights reversed direction. This time, Tahl took Qui-Gon's arm so that they could move quickly.

"Master Tahl! Please slow down!" TooJay called in her musical voice. "I must assist!"

"Get lost!" Tahl yelled over her shoulder. "I'm in a hurry!"

"I cannot get lost, sir," TooJay replied, hurrying after them. "I'm a navigation droid."

Qui-Gon and Tahl hurried to the small conference room where they had agreed to meet Yoda for updates. The room was the most secure at the Temple, with a scanner that constantly monitored for surveillance devices.

Yoda was waiting as they entered the white chamber.

"Door to close in approximately two seconds," TooJay told Tahl.

"TooJay -" Tahl said impatiently.

"I shall wait outside, sir," TooJay answered.

The door hissed shut behind them. Yoda looked grave.

"Bad news, I have," he said. "Another theft to report. Stolen this time are the healing crystals of fire."

"The crystals?" Qui-Gon asked, stunned. "But they're under the highest security."

Tahl let out a breath. "Who knows?"

"The Council only," Yoda said. "But fear we do that word will get out."

Every time Qui-Gon thought the situation could not get worse, it did. The seriousness of the thefts was escalating. Which could be the point.

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There is the pattern, Qui-Gon thought. This isn't random. It's planned.

This time, the thief had struck at the very heart of the Temple. The healing crystals of fire had been a Jedi treasure for thousands of years. They were held in a meditation chamber that was accessible to all students. The room's only heat and light source was from the crystals themselves. Embedded in the heart of each rock was an eternal flame.

When the students discovered them stolen, it would surely rock their belief in the Temple's invincibility. Maybe it would test their belief in the Force itself.

"Find who did this you must," Yoda told them. "But something more important you must find."

"What is that, Yoda?" Tahl asked.

"You must find *why*," Yoda said urgently. "Fear I do that in *why* the seed for our destruction lies."

Yoda walked out. The door hissed behind him.

"First step?" Tahl asked Qui-Gon.

"My quarters," Qui-Gon answered. "I have notes on my datapad. And from now on, we should carry our notes on us at all times. If the healing crystals are vulnerable, so are we."

Qui-Gon and Tahl entered the chamber. Qui-Gon had worried that his datapad would be missing, but it was right where he had left it, in a drawer by his sleep-couch. There were no locks or safes at the Temple.

"All right," he said. "Let's get back to--"

He stopped to watch Tahl. It was obvious his friend wasn't listening to him. She stood in the middle of the room, a look of intense concentration on her face. He waited, not wanting to interrupt.

"Do you smell it?" she asked. "Someone has been here, Qui-Gon. There is your scent in the room... and something else. An intruder."

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Qui-Gon looked around the room. Nothing had been disturbed. He activated his datapad. All his coded notes were still there. Interviews with students, security procedures. Could someone have broken the code and read them? It didn't matter much. He hadn't recorded speculation, only facts. But still, someone had been here.

Sudden excitement rippled through Qui-Gon. Tahl turned, catching the change in his mood. More and more, it was extraordinary what she could pick up without seeing.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You just found a way to catch the thief," Qui-Gon replied.

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan, Cerasi, and Mawat emerged from the tunnel only a block from the Hall of Evidence. Obi-Wan had alerted all members of the Security Squad to meet him there. He did not want to use violence, but a show of weapons could come in handy. A showdown must be avoided at all costs.

But they were too late. A showdown was already in progress.

Wehutti and the Elders had formed a human chain around the Hall. They stood shoulder to shoulder facing Nield and his helpers.

Nield had apparently started the demolition before being outmaneuvered by the Elders. Some markers had been dragged out and partially demolished. Floaters packed with beamdrills and other demolition equipment were parked outside the human wall. Obviously, Wehutti and the Elders had managed to get between Nield and the equipment.

Cerasi and Obi-Wan hurried over to Nield.

"Look at them," Nield said disgustedly. "Protecting their hate with their lives."

"This is a bad situation, Nield," Obi-Wan said.

"Thanks for the information," Nield said sarcastically. Then he sighed. "Look, I know it's bad. Why do you think I'm standing here, not doing anything? If we use force to break through them,

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it can backfire. But we can't let them win. We have to destroy the Hall."

"Why?" Cerasi asked.

Nield whipped his head around. "What do you mean? You know why."

"I thought I did," Cerasi said. "I've been having second thoughts, Nield. Is it wise to destroy the only place we have collected our history?"

"A history of death and destruction!"

"Yes," Cerasi admitted. "But it is our history."

Nield just stared at Cerasi. "I can't believe this," he muttered.

"Nield, we have to consider Zehava, too," Obi-Wan put in. "When I said this was a bad situation, I meant more than just the destruction of this Hall. If you insist on using force, the news will travel all over the city. The people are already unhappy with us. They're cold, and winter is coming. They need to see signs of rebuilding, not more destruction."

Nield looked from Cerasi to Obi-Wan in disbelief. "What happened to our ideals? Are we going to compromise so soon?"

"Is compromise so bad?" Cerasi asked. "Whole civilizations are built on it." She put her hand on Nield's arm. "Let Wehutti win this one, Nield."

He shook his head violently. "No. And since when do you care if your father is defeated? You didn't care during the war! You shot at enough Elders. You would have killed him if you could!"

Nield's words seemed to hit Cerasi in the face. She turned away.

"Nield, listen," Obi-Wan pleaded. "This isn't about Wehutti. We all want what's best for Zehava. These are matters we all need to discuss. We should put it to a vote. Isn't that why we set up the system of government? You yourself wanted the council. You didn't want complete authority, remember?"

Nield's dark eyes were stormy. "All right. I can't oppose both of you."

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Cerasi looked at him pleadingly. "We aren't opposing you, Nield. We're still together." She held up her palm.

Nield ignored it. He turned away and stalked off. He signaled to his squad, and after a moment, they followed, with baffled expressions on their faces. They had never seen Nield give up before.

The Elders let out a great cheer. Wehutti's strong voice boomed out. "We have our victory!"

Cerasi's face was troubled as she watched her father. "I think I just made a mistake. I shouldn't have argued with Nield in front of them."

"I don't think we had a choice," Obi-Wan said, though he, too, was worried by the Elders' reaction. Knowing Wehutti, he would turn this into a great victory and use it to his advantage.

Wehutti suddenly turned and looked over the heads of the crowd, straight at Cerasi. Their gazes locked. Obi-Wan saw the bravado slip from Wehutti's gaze as he looked at his daughter. A softness took its place.

So he is a man, after all, Obi-Wan thought. For the first time, he thought there might be hope for Cerasi to reconnect to the father she longed for.

An Elder tugged at Wehutti's arm, and he brusquely turned away. Cerasi let out a small sigh.

"Nield said his parents were more than warriors to him," she said. "I feel that way, too. I know my father is filled with hate. But if I want to remember, I can recall love, too."

"I think love is there," Obi-Wan said.

"That is sacred to me," she said. "And that means that the memories in the Halls might be sacred, too." She turned to Obi-Wan. "Do you know what I mean? Is anything sacred to you?"

Unbidden, an image flashed in Obi-Wan's mind. He saw the Temple, rising through the blue skies and white buildings of Coruscant, impossibly high, flashing golden in the light. He saw long, cool halls, quiet rooms, rushing fountains, a lake greener than Cerasi's eyes. He felt the hush inside himself as he sat in

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front of the healing crystals of fire and gazed into their flickering depths.

The emotion swamped him. *He missed being a Jedi.*

He missed his sure, strong connection to the Force. He had lost that. It was almost as though he were a first-year student again, aware of something he could feel, but unable to control it. He missed the sense of purpose he felt at the Temple, the sense that he knew exactly where he was going and was content to follow his path.

And he missed Qui-Gon most of all.

That connection was over. Obi-Wan could return to the Temple. Yoda would welcome him, he knew. Whether he could be a Jedi again was up to the Council to decide. Others had left and come back.

But Qui-Gon would not take him back, nor would he welcome him. The Jedi Master was through with him. And, Obi-Wan knew, he had every right to be. Once broken, such profound trust cannot be regained.

Cerasi read the truth in his eyes. "You miss it."

"Yes."

She nodded, as though this confirmed something she'd been thinking about. "It's not a shameful thing, Obi-Wan. Maybe you were meant for a wider world than we can offer you here. Your destiny might be for a different life."

"But I love Melida/Daan," Obi-Wan said.

"That doesn't have to change. You could contact him, you know."

Obi-Wan did not have to ask who she meant.

"You chose as you had to at that moment," Cerasi continued. "From what you've told me of the Jedi, no one will blame you."

Obi-Wan looked over the plaza toward the gray sky, up into the atmosphere where a few stars were beginning to twinkle. Beyond them lay the other worlds of the galaxy, Coruscant among them. A distance of three days with a fast ship. Yet for Obi-Wan, unreachable.

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"One will blame me," he replied. "Always."

Chapter Ten

Tahl and Qui-Gon went through their lists. Every student, teacher, and Temple worker who had access to the various stolen items and could not account for their time during that period was cross-checked against the central list. They hoped to narrow down who they needed to interview. The computer tallied the names. The list was narrowed to two hundred and sixty-seven.

Tahl groaned aloud when the computer read the number. "It will take days to interview so many."

"Then we'd better get started," Qui-Gon said.

One advantage they had was that the interviews could be short. They scheduled each one for five minutes only. All they needed was for Tahl to pick up the scent she'd smelled in Qui-Gon's quarters.

The short time between interviews meant that students ran into each other outside the room. Gossip buzzed out in the halls. The rumors about the stolen crystals were starting. Soon, there was a continual pileup of students in the hall.

"Where is TooJay when I need her?" Tahl complained wearily at the end of a long day. "Somebody should take charge out there."

"We're almost through," Qui-Gon said. "Bant Eerin is next."

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A gentle knock came on the door, and Qui-Gon activated the release. The door hissed open.

Bant was only eleven, and small for her age. A Calamarian, she thrived in moist, humid climates. Qui-Gon knew that she had been a special friend of Obi-Wan's. She looked nervous as she approached the table where Qui-Gon and Tahl were sitting. Too nervous?

Tahl didn't indicate any surprise or special alertness. But underneath the table, she reached out and grabbed Qui-Gon's knee.

She had smelled the intruder.

Qui-Gon looked at the slender girl again. Surely this couldn't be the thief! Bant's silver eyes slid away from his gaze involuntarily. Then she remembered her Jedi training and quickly met his gaze.

"You seem uncomfortable," Qui-Gon began neutrally. "This is not an inquisition."

Bant nodded uneasily.

"But you can see that with the thefts, we need to speak with all students."

Again, she nodded.

"Would you consent to have your room searched?"

"Of-of course," Bant replied.

"Have you ever violated Temple security?"

"No," Bant said, her voice wobbling a bit.

Tahl leaned over to murmur in Qui-Gon's ear. "She is afraid of you."

Yes, Qui-Gon could feel it, too. Why should Bant be afraid?

"Why are you afraid?" he asked sternly.

Bant swallowed. "B-because you are Qui-Gon Jinn. You took Obi-Wan away. All he wanted was to be your Padawan, but a short while later he left the Jedi. And I wonder..."

"What?" Qui-Gon asked.

"W-what you did to him," she whispered.

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"The girl is innocent," Tahl said.

"I know," Qui-Gon replied heavily.

"She didn't know what she was saying," Tahl said. "Obi-Wan's leaving was not your fault."

Qui-Gon didn't answer. The long day had taken its toll. He could march for hours, fight off ten armed enemies, and here he was exhausted after interviewing children.

Without speaking, they headed for the lake. TooJay had not shown up to bring Tahl back to her quarters. Qui-Gon was grateful not to have her trilling voice calling out every obstruction. If Tahl held his arm, she could move just as quickly as he, even over uneven ground.

They reached the lake, and Tahl slipped her arm out from his. She did not want to take any more help than she needed.

"We should decide on our next step," Qui-Gon said, staring out at the clear green lake, now dusky with evening shadows. The lake took up five levels of the Temple, and was landscaped with trees and shrubs. Narrow paths wound through the greenery. One had the illusion of being on the planet's surface instead of suspended high above. "It's time to flush out the thief. We could—"

"Qui-Gon, I smell it." Tahl interrupted him excitedly.

Qui-Gon looked around. They were alone. "But there's no one here."

She reached down and trailed a hand in the water. "It wasn't a *person* I smelled. It was this." She held up her glistening hand. "I smelled the lake!"

Suddenly, the cloudiness of Qui-Gon's mind cleared, and facts clicked into place.

"We have to explore the bottom of that lake," he said.

Tahl's mind made the connection as quickly as Qui-Gon's did. "The thief is hiding the stolen items there?"

"Maybe."

"Obviously, I'm out," Tahl said ruefully. "How's your swimming, Qui-Gon?"

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"Fine," Qui-Gon said. "But I know someone who can do the job better."

Bant's silver eyes widened as she opened her door and saw Qui-Gon and Tahl.

"I would never hurt the Temple -" she began tearfully.

"Bant, we need your help," Qui-Gon interrupted kindly.

Quickly, he told her what they needed. He didn't want to involve the regular Jedi security patrol if he didn't have to. Everyone at the Temple was still a suspect. But both Qui-Gon and Tahl were convinced of Bant's innocence.

The Calamarian girl was the perfect choice. She swam every day, and her clothes gave off a faint smell of water and humidity. That was the scent Tahl had picked up in Qui-Gon's quarters. Bant no doubt knew the lake bottom well. She could do the search more efficiently than Qui-Gon could.

Bant nodded her acceptance, her tears already drying. "Of course I can do that," she said. "For a Calamarian, it's nothing."

Together, the three hurried back to the lake.

"You'll have to cover the whole lake," Qui-Gon told Bant as they came to the beach. "But I'm guessing that if something is hidden below, it will be fairly close to shore." He smiled at her. "Not everyone is as good a swimmer as you."

Bant stripped down to the suit she wore for bathing. "Don't worry if I'm underwater for a long time."

Qui-Gon was glad she'd given him the instruction after she disappeared under the surface. Even though he knew she was amphibious, the amount of time she could spend underwater still tried his nerves. He watched and Tahl listened just as intently for the small splash Bant made as she resurfaced. Each time, she shook her head, took a deep breath, and dived underwater again.

The illumination bank had powered down to dusk when Bant resurfaced again. Qui-Gon was ready to ask her to stop. He didn't want to exhaust the girl. But she waved at them excitedly.

"I found something!"

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Qui-Gon slipped off his boots and waded into the cool water. He swam out to Bant. Taking a deep breath, he followed her underwater.

The lake water was dark. He could barely make out the flicker of Bant's pale skin as they swam down, down to the bottom. Qui-Gon wished he'd been prepared. He should have brought an underwater glow rod and a breather. He'd been too impatient.

But suddenly the crate loomed in front of him, settled into the fine sand at the bottom of the lake. Qui-Gon circled around it. There was no plant life or algae on it, which meant it had only sunk recently.

He signaled to Bant to surface, but she remained underwater as he fastened a carbon rope around the container. He tugged at it, and the container rose. It was heavy. Bant grabbed part of the rope to help, and together, they pulled the crate to the surface.

Qui-Gon emerged, gasping for air. Bant was breathing easily. She treaded water while he regained his breath. Then they towed the container to shore. When he could stand, Qui-Gon carried it up to the beach.

He described the container to Tahl. "I've never seen anything like it before."

"I have," Bant said. She knelt and ran her fingers along it. "We have them back on my world. Since so much of it is underwater and prone to floods, we store things in watertight containers. Look." She found a hidden panel and opened it. "You can place things in this compartment. Then you close the panel and activate the vacuum pump. It removes the water, then slides the item into the dry interior compartment. That way you can put things in without taking the container out of the water."

"Clever," Qui-Gon said. "Can you open it?"

"I think so." Bant pressed another button. The hinged top popped open.

Qui-Gon looked inside. "The lightsabers!"

Qui-Gon searched through the items. "Most everything is here, but I think some things are missing."

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"The crystals?" Tahl asked.

"Not here," Qui-Gon said. Disappointment thudded through him. But this was a start.

"What do we do now?" Tahl wondered.

Qui-Gon turned to Bant. "You have done well today. Can you keep what you did to yourself?"

Bant nodded. "I will tell no one, of course."

Qui-Gon ran his hands over the container. "I must ask you to do one last thing. Help me return this to where we found it." He looked at the calm, shadowy surface of the lake.

"At last it's time," he said. "We can set the trap."

Chapter Eleven

"I call for a vote on a stop action for the New History Squad's demolitions of the Halls of Evidence," Cerasi called out. Her voice echoed off the crumbling walls of the building.

For once, the council chamber was silent. All of the Young were stunned at the call to oppose Nield. Cerasi, Obi-Wan, and Nield were almost seen as one person by the group. The division between the friends was shocking.

Birds wheeled overhead in the blue sky. Occasionally, one would fly inside the open roof and perch above, and a shrill *cam* would split the air.

Deila stood. "I second the motion."

The room erupted in shouts and demands. Obi-Wan could only pick out some of them.

The Halls must be destroyed! Nield is right!

Nield has taken this too far!

Cerasi is right! We need housing, not rubble!

Nield's face was still and white as he waited out the shouting. Cerasi gripped her hands together. As council head it was her job to control the crowd.

At last she stood and pounded on the table with the stone she used to maintain order. "Quiet!" she shouted. "Sit down and be quiet!"

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Slowly, the boys and girls took their seats. Everyone looked at Cerasi expectantly.

She cleared her throat. "The council shall vote. On the issue of a stop action on the demolition of the Halls, vote yes for the action, and no to continue the demolition." Cerasi turned to Mawat. "You may begin."

"Hey, I agree with Nield," Mawat said. "The demolition must continue. I vote no on the stop action."

Cerasi turned to the next council member, and the next. By the time the vote got back to her, it stood at four against the stop action and four for it.

Cerasi gave a quick, nervous glance to Obi-Wan. There were only three votes left: Cerasi's, Nield's, and Obi-Wan's. Cerasi would vote for the stop action. Nield would vote against it. Obi-Wan would be the one to break the tie.

"I vote yes," Cerasi said quietly.

Everyone looked at Nield. "And I vote no, for the continued peace and security of Melida/Daan!" he called in a ringing voice.

Now all eyes in the chamber turned to Obi-Wan. He heard the mocking *can, can* of the birds overhead and the moaning of the wind. His heart was heavy as he said, "I vote yes."

"The motion is carried," Cerasi said, swallowing hard. "The New History Squad shall temporarily cease all demolition of the Halls until further study."

For a moment, no one moved. Then Nield suddenly sprang to his feet. "I call for another vote!" he shouted. "I call for the removal of Obi-Wan from the council!"

Obi-Wan stiffened.

"What?" Cerasi cried.

Nield turned to the crowd. "How can Obi-Wan get a vote when he is neither Melida nor Daan?"

"Obi-Wan is one of us!" Cerasi cried in shock.

"Nield is right!" Mawat stood, his eyes blazing.

"Vote again!" a supporter of Nield cried.

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Obi-Wan felt as though he could not move. Never could he have imagined Nield making such a charge. He and Nield were like brothers. Just because they disagreed on this issue didn't mean that would change. At least not for him.

Cerasi took charge. "Council members have been elected for a one-year period. Nield cannot oust any of us just because a vote went against him. Obi-Wan was a hero of the war, and was voted in by an overwhelming majority." She banged her rock on the table. "The stop-action vote has carried. This meeting is over."

She stood and motioned for the other council members to do the same. But the crowd was angry. Shouts and cries filled the air. Someone in a back row pushed someone else, and a fight broke out.

"We must decide on our own destiny!" Nield was shouting. "Melida and Daan together!"

The shouting grew louder. Obi-Wan stood at his place, still unable to move. He didn't know what to do. Suddenly, he was an outsider. He glanced at Cerasi. She stared out over the crowd, her face white, her hands gripping the edge of the table. She met his gaze with despair. The unity of the Young was disintegrating before their eyes.

In the days after the meeting Obi-Wan and Cerasi could only watch helplessly as the Young splintered apart. Nield would not talk to them. He moved aboveground and slept with Mawat and the Scavenger Young in the park. Heartbroken, Obi-Wan and Cerasi could only try to heal the division they had caused.

We cannot let this divide us, they pleaded.

But the divide only grew wider.

Nield worked on Mawat to convince the Scavenger Young to support him. If he had enough votes, he could overthrow the entire council and call for a new one. He targeted Obi-Wan as an outsider who had no right to make decisions for Melida/Daan.

"If he succeeds, war could break out again," Cerasi whispered to Obi-Wan late one night as they sat up together in the vault. "If

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the Elders see that we are divided, they will use the rift to divide us further."

"I should resign from the council," Obi-Wan declared. "It's the only way to end this."

Cerasi shook her head. "We fought because we believed in ending tribal rivalries. Remember our slogan, We Are Everyone? If we start singling out who hasn't been born here, how is that any different from tribal prejudice?"

"Still, it would heal us temporarily," Obi-Wan argued.

"Don't you see, Obi-Wan?" Cerasi asked despairingly. "It is already too late."

Obi-Wan got up restlessly and wrapped his cloak around himself. He drew comfort from Cerasi, but he needed answers she couldn't give. He said a quiet good night to her and headed aboveground.

The night was cold. He climbed onto a nearby roof in order to be closer to the stars. Reaching inside his tunic, he withdrew the river stone that Qui-Gon had given him as a thirteenth birthday present. As usual, the stone was warm. When he held it between his hands, it heated them. Obi-Wan closed his eyes. He could almost feel the presence of the Force. It had not deserted him. It could not. He had to remember that.

He needed Qui-Gon. His Master was not the most talkative companion, but Obi-Wan had not fully realized how much he relied on Qui-Gon's counsel. He could use it now.

Once, when he was Qui-Gon's Padawan, he had only to concentrate and he could summon Qui-Gon. Now he reached out and felt nothing.

Events were slipping out of his control. Everything he'd fought for was now in danger, and he had no idea how to fix anything. There were plenty of people to talk to on Melida/Daan, but no one whose mature insight he could depend on. Even Cerasi was at a loss.

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If war threatened to break out, could he appeal to the Temple to send a Jedi as guardian of peace? Would they send Qui-Gon? Could he dare to ask such a thing?

And if he asked, would Qui-Gon come?

Chapter Twelve

Because of heightened security, the illumination bank was turned off. The darkness was absolute. Luck was with them, Qui-Gon thought. He crouched with Tahl in the trees by the shoreline of the lake. He could barely make out the glint of the water.

"At last we're even," Tahl murmured when Qui-Gon told her how dark it was.

They had calculated that another theft would happen that evening. They had seen the thefts fall into an escalating pattern. It was time to follow up on the stunning theft of the crystals with another crime. The thief would need to conceal what he or she stole, and would come to the lake.

Or so they hoped.

Tahl would not stay behind. He had argued with her and lost. If Qui-Gon saw who the culprit was, she could get the news back to Yoda.

Qui-Gon might need to follow the thief. Tahl had argued that they should not rely on corn-links for communication. This was too important. And they needed to do everything as silently as possible. It was best not to tip off the thief.

"All right," he finally agreed. "Just leave TooJay in your quarters."

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They had been waiting for five hours. Every so often they would stand and stretch each muscle in a Jedi exercise known as "stationary movement." That kept them awake and their muscles fluid.

The lakeside was so still that it was no more than a flickering of a leaf that alerted Qui-Gon to the presence of another. Tahl had heard it; perhaps she had even heard a disturbance earlier, for her head was already turned toward the sound.

Qui-Gon called on the Force to help him. He was dressed in a dark robe and blended in perfectly with the vegetation. He kept himself perfectly still.

A figure emerged onto the beach from their left, not from the path he had anticipated. The figure was hooded, but Qui-Gon saw that it was a boy. Judging by his height, it was one of the older boys. The stance was familiar, too, Qui-Gon did not have to wait until the hood fell back to reveal the gleam of a white ponytail to know that it was Bruck.

He leaned over and put his lips to Tahl's ear. He whispered Bruck's name, and she nodded.

Bruck sat on the shore and took off his boots and outer cloak. Then he tied a waterproof parcel around his neck, lit a glow rod and waded into the lake. He took a deep breath and disappeared.

"He's underwater," Qui-Gon said in a low tone to Tahl. "When he comes out, I'll follow him. You wait here. Don't move a muscle. He must not realize that he's being followed."

"All right," Tahl agreed. "If you're not back in fifteen minutes, I'll get help."

In minutes, Bruck resurfaced and swam with a strong stroke to shore. He walked out of the lake and pulled on his boots, then pulled the cloak around him. Instead of heading back to the turbolift, he chose an overgrown path. Qui-Gon knew it well. It led through the undergrowth toward the utility buildings that held floaters and hydrocrafts.

Qui-Gon followed behind. Bruck could be heading for a meeting. He could be heading to where he'd stashed the other

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stolen objects. Either way, they would learn something important tonight.

Bruck was being careful, but Qui-Gon was more so. He had more practice in moving silently than the boy did. He followed Bruck by sound rather than sight.

The overhanging trees blocked out the surroundings as the path wound farther away from the lake. Soon they would be at the utility sheds. Would someone be there to meet Bruck? Qui-Gon picked up his pace slightly so that he could see the boy.

"Tree root, two centimeters ahead." A well-known voice split the silence. "Leaf frond, three centimeters straight ahead at eye level!"

TooJay! Qui-Gon stopped and went perfectly still. Bruck turned, his ponytail whipping around. He could not see Qui-Gon in the darkness. But he turned and ran.

It was no use following him. He would most likely double back and return to the turbolift. He knew someone was out here.

Disgusted, Qui-Gon turned back. Tahl was waiting on the path a few meters back. TooJay stood next to her.

"Qui-Gon Jinn approaching," TooJay said pleasantly.

Furiously, Tahl reached over and shut off TooJay's speaking mechanism. The droid waved its arms, but could not speak.

"Qui-Gon, I'm sorry," Tahl said rapidly. "I didn't realize that TooJay was looking for me. As soon as I started down the path, she was behind me."

"Why did you follow me?" Qui-Gon asked irritably.

"Because someone was following *you*," Tahl explained. "They moved so quietly you might not have heard them. I was worried."

"Someone from the Temple?" Qui-Gon asked. "Could you tell?"

"I don't think so," Tahl said hesitantly. "Students and teachers, even workers, wear soft-soled boots. This person wore heavier boots. And the clothes had a whispery sound. Not like the sound of our cloaks or tunics. I think it's a man. The footfalls

Jude Watson

were heavy, and he brushed the icus leaves. He has to be close to your height."

"So there is an intruder," Qui-Gon said. "That was who Bruck was going to meet."

"Yes," Tahl agreed. "But not only that. He didn't hide in the bushes or try to track you through the trees. He knew the way. This intruder felt at home here. And he was not afraid."

A sudden chill ran through Qui-Gon. This was the scariest news of all.

Chapter Thirteen

When Obi-Wan woke the next morning, he was alone. Most of the Young had already headed aboveground. Cerasi probably hadn't wanted to wake him. He was sure that she'd been awake when he'd slipped back into his sleeping area near dawn.

Cerasi had left him a plate of fruit and a muja muffin for breakfast. He ate, wondering when he'd get a chance to eat again. Each day was so busy. If he wasn't on duty with the Security Squad, he was trying, with Cerasi, to convince the Young that they needed to talk without anger.

Suddenly Roenni burst into the space. He hadn't seen much of the quiet girl lately. She kept to herself.

"Obi-Wan, they need you," she said breathlessly.

"Who needs me?" he asked, standing up.

"Everyone." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Roenni, start from the beginning."

"Nield has convinced Mawat that they must overthrow the vote of the council and demolish the Hall of Evidence on Glory Street," Roenni said. "He's gathered most of his squad and some of the Scavenger Young."

Obi-Wan sighed. He would have to deal with this.

"They have weapons," Roenni warned.

"Where did they get them?" Obi-Wan asked sharply.

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"I don't know. But Wehutti is there with the Elders, and they have weapons, too."

Dismay filled Obi-Wan. This is what he and Cerasi had feared, what they'd tried to avoid. Open conflict was in the streets of Zehava once more.

He debated whether to try to find Cerasi. He could call her on the comlink. But he didn't have much time, and it was better that she find out about the conflict after it was over. He remembered how torn she'd been to see Wehutti and Nield at odds last time.

Instead, he sent the emergency signal to his squad, along with the location of the site. He hoped they would arrive soon so he wouldn't have to face Nield alone. The sight of Obi-Wan would not calm Nield. Still he had to try.

Grabbing his vibroblade, Obi-Wan headed aboveground.

When he got to Glory Street, his worst fears were realized. There was a large stone fountain with dry jets in the center of the plaza. Nield and his forces stood at the end of the plaza, holding transparent shields and carrying blasters and vibroblades. Wehutti and the Elders were opposite, all wearing plastoid armor and carrying weapons. They blocked the entrance to the Hall of Evidence. Only the fountain stood between them. It was an explosion waiting to happen.

Obi-Wan hurried toward them. "I order you in the name of the government of Melida/Daan to disarm!" he called as he ran. He saw members of his squad hurrying toward the spot, their weapons at the ready. He made a signal to them to stand fast. If they started shooting, the Elders and Nield's forces would as well.

"You do not represent the government of Melida/Daan!" Nield shouted.

Obi-Wan's squad gathered around him. They looked from Nield to Obi-Wan, and he saw confusion on their faces. Obviously, Nield had reached some of them when he'd called Obi-Wan an outsider. Even Deila looked uncertain.

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Ignoring their hesitation, Obi-Wan quickly gave orders for half the squad to surround the perimeter. At least he could prevent this battle from spilling out into the city core. He had to prevent any reinforcements from arriving. This confrontation could not escalate into war.

He walked slowly toward the groups. He could feel the turbulence in the air, the hot emotion. He knew that everyone was just a hair away from using their weapons.

"Move aside, Wehutti," Nield said. "We won the war. Let us do our work."

"We will not allow the desecration of our ancestors by a band of brats!" Wehutti thundered.

"We will not allow murderers to be treated as the honored dead!" Nield shouted back. He raised his blaster rifle. "Now move!"

Suddenly, the grate in the dry fountain opened, and Cerasi swung herself up and out. She began to run toward the middle of the two groups. "No!" she shouted as she ran. "This cannot happen!"

"Cerasi!" With a cry, Obi-Wan sprang forward. At the same moment, shots rang out. In the confusion, Obi-Wan could not place where they came from.

But they hit their mark. Cerasi's eyes widened as the blaster fire ripped into her chest. Slowly, she sank to her knees. Obi-Wan reached her just as she fell backward, into his arms.

"Cerasi!" he cried.

Her green eyes were glazed.

"You'll be okay," he said frantically. "Can you hear me? You don't need luck. Cerasi!"

He held up his palm. She tried to raise her hand, but it fell back. Her eyes unfocused.

"No!" Obi-Wan screamed.

He felt for her pulse with shaking fingers. There was no beat of her blood, not even a flutter.

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Agony ripped through him. He looked up at Nield and Wehutti. He couldn't form the words. It was as though he had forgotten how to speak. Tears ran down his face as the pain grew and expanded to every corner of his brain, his heart. It seemed unbearable. His body could not hold this much pain. It would simply break apart. Yet he knew it was only the beginning.

Chapter Fourteen

The shock waves of Cerasi's death echoed through Zehava. She had been the symbol of peace. Her death became a symbol, too.

But it was not a symbol of reconciliation. Each side took her death and fashioned it to fit their own ends. For the Elders, she was a symbol of the irresponsibility and recklessness of the Young. For the Young, her tragic death was a symbol of the inflexible hatred of the Elders. Each group blamed the other for her death.

The Young and the Elders were more bitterly divided than ever. Though Wehutti and Nield were both in seclusion, their factions patrolled the streets, now openly armed. Each faction gathered more support every day. The rumor was that war was inevitable.

Obi-Wan knew that Cerasi would hate what her death had become: a reason to fight. But he could not begin to struggle with meanings and symbols. He could only grieve.

Nield had not attended Cerasi's funeral. Her ashes were now being stored in the Hall of Evidence where her parents' remains were.

Obi-Wan was alone. The loss of Cerasi was with him constantly. As soon as he opened his eyes he felt it. It was as

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though his bones had left his body, leaving an empty, yawning space. He wandered through the city streets, wondering how people could continue to eat, shop, live, when Cerasi was gone.

He relived the moment over and over. He asked himself why he hadn't run faster, or started toward her earlier, or anticipated that she would be there. Why couldn't he have caught the blaster fire?

Then he would see the shock in her crystal eyes as the fire hit her, and he would want to scream and pound the walls. Rage kept him as occupied as grief.

The loss of her presence hit him afresh from moment to moment. The knowledge that he'd never talk to her again made him ache. He missed his friend. He would always miss her. She had been a vivid presence in his life. They still had so much left to say to each other.

So Obi-Wan kept on walking. He walked until he was exhausted, until he could barely see. Then he slept for as long as he could. As soon as he awoke, he began to walk again.

Days passed. He did not know how to climb out of this grief. Then one day he found himself at the plaza where Glory Street ended and Cerasi had died. Someone had hung up a banner and stretched it between two trees.

AVENGE CERASI CHOOSE WAR

Something snapped in Obi-Wan. He ran at the banner and jumped up to grab it. The material was hard to tear, but he kept at it, muscles aching, fingers stiff, until he had ripped it into tiny pieces.

Cerasi could not be used this way. He had to stop it. He had to take his grief and his love for her and fight to stop it. He had to talk to Nield. No one else could help him.

Obi-Wan found him in the tunnels, in a room far away from the vault where they'd first met. It was a room they'd used for a short time as storage. Nield sat on a bench, his head down.

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"Nield?" Obi-Wan entered the room hesitantly. "I've been searching for you."

Nield didn't look up. But neither did he ask Obi-Wan to leave.

"Our hearts are broken," Obi-Wan said. "I know that. I miss her. But if she could see what is happening, she would be furious. Do you know what I mean?"

Nield didn't answer.

"They're mobilizing for war and using Cerasi as a reason," Obi-Wan said. "We can't let that happen. It would violate everything she stood for. We couldn't protect Cerasi when she was alive. But we can protect her memory."

Nield's head still hung down. Was his grief so huge that he couldn't hear Obi-Wan? Or had he reached him?

Then Nield looked up. Obi-Wan took a step backward. Instead of the grief he expected to see, Nield's face was twisted with rage.

"How dare you come here," Nield said, his voice throbbing with fury. "How dare you say you couldn't protect her? Why not, Obi-Wan?" Nield stood. In the small space, his head nearly touched the ceiling. His anger filled the chamber.

"I tried to get to her," Obi-Wan began. "I--"

"She shouldn't have been there at all!" Nield shouted. "You should have been watching her, protecting her, not rushing into situations trying to save strangers like a... Jedi!"

Spitting out the last word, Nield took a menacing step toward Obi-Wan. His dark eyes burned. Obi-Wan could see the unshed tears in them. Tears of grief and rage.

"Jedi, always with their minds on higher things," Nield continued bitterly. "Always better than those they protect, unable to connect with living beings, with flesh and blood and hearts..."

"No!" Obi-Wan cried. "That's not what Jedi are about! That's exactly opposite of who we are!"

"*We*!" Nield cried. "You see? You *are* a Jedi! You have no loyalty to us. You're a stranger. You influenced Cerasi, you made her oppose me--"

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"No, Nield." Obi-Wan struggled to keep his voice calm and steady. "You know that's not true. No one could ever influence Cerasi or tell her what to do. She only wanted peace. That's why I'm here."

Nield's hands curled into fists. "Peace?" he hissed. "What is that? What is peace next to loss? Cerasi was killed by the Elders and they must suffer. I won't rest until every filthy Elder is dead. I will avenge her or die!"

Obi-Wan was taken aback. Nield sounded like a hologram in the Halls that he detested.

"What are you doing here, Obi-Wan Kenobi?" Nield asked, disgust choking his voice. "You aren't part of the Young. You never were. You're not Melida. You're not Daan. You're nobody, you're nowhere, and you are nothing to me." The anger left Nield's voice, and weariness seemed to pull him down on the bench. "Now get out of my sight... and get off my planet."

Obi-Wan backed out of the chamber. He walked through the tunnels until he saw a square of gray light overhead. He pulled himself up through a grate he had never been through before. He found himself on an unfamiliar street. He was lost. He took a step in one direction, then another. His brain was reeling, and he couldn't gather his thoughts. They were clouded by Nield's words.

Where should he go? Every cord that connected him to his life had snapped. Everyone he cared about was gone.

Nield was right. Without the Jedi, without the Young, he had nobody. He *was* nobody. When nothing was left, where was there to turn?

The gray sky seemed to press down on him, grinding him into the pavement. He wanted to fall down and never rise again.

But as he reached the bottom of his despair, he heard a voice in his head.

Always here, you may come, when lost you are...

Chapter Fifteen

Qui-Gon alerted security to be on the lookout for Bruck. They could comb the grounds more efficiently than he could. Then he raised the container from the water himself and dragged it back to shore. At least they could return the stolen property.

He retrieved Obi-Wan's lightsaber from the dry compartment. He hit the activator, and it shot to life immediately, glowing ice-blue in the darkness. It hadn't been damaged, he saw with relief. He deactivated it and hooked it into his belt next to his own.

Tahl led the silenced TooJay back to her quarters. She would coordinate the search efforts from there. Qui-Gon went straight to Bruck's chamber.

The boy wasn't there, of course. Security had already looked for him. It was clear that the boy had decided not to take chances. He was gone for good.

Qui-Gon looked around Bruck's room. If there was a clue here to why a promising boy would do such things, he couldn't see it. His clothes were neatly folded, his desk neat. What had been in the boy's heart? Qui-Gon touched the lightsaber on his belt. What was in *any* boy's heart? And why did Yoda think that Qui-Gon could see into them?

He had let the Temple down. Bruck's anger had been there. He hadn't seen it. Just as he hadn't seen the anger of his first

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Padawan, Xanatos. Or the unrest of Obi-Wan. Wearily, Qui-Gon gazed out the window. The sun was rising. It was time to tell Yoda. One of their own had betrayed them.

His comlink flashed red - Yoda was calling him. He was most likely anxious for the report.

Qui-Gon took the turbolift to the conference room where he knew Yoda would be waiting. Yoda was alone in the room when he walked in.

"So you've heard," he said.

"Bruck our culprit is," Yoda said. "Troubling and sad, yes. Called you here for something else, I have. A message for you."

Startled, Qui-Gon looked at Yoda, but the Master gave no clues. He activated a hologram instead.

The image of Obi-Wan suddenly appeared in the room.

Angrily, Qui-Gon turned away and started for the door.

"I don't have time--"

Obi-Wan's voice was soft. "Cerasi is dead."

The words hit Qui-Gon hard. He stopped and turned. Now he could see that his former Padawan's face was etched with misery.

"She was caught in a cross-fire between Elder and Young forces."

Sorrow flooded Qui-Gon. During his short time on Melida/Daan he had grown fond of the girl. He had understood why Obi-Wan had been drawn to her. This was a tragedy.

"Now each side blames the other for her death," Obi-Wan continued.

"Even Nield is ready for battle. Wehutti's forces have rearmed. My squad has been disbanded. I have no command, no way to convince the others to disarm."

Qui-Gon took an unconscious step toward the hologram. Obi-Wan's face was etched with grief and something else, something Qui-Gon had seen on the faces of those most stunned by an awful fate: incomprehension.

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His former Padawan stood in miniature, hands dangling at his sides helplessly. "I don't know what to do," he confessed. "I am no longer a Jedi. Yet I know what a Jedi can do. And I know that only a Jedi can help. Qui-Gon, I realize I have done harm to us. But will you help me now?"

Qui-Gon's hand drifted to Obi-Wan's lightsaber, still tucked into his belt. He closed his fingers around the hilt. It seemed to hold some sort of charge, even though it was deactivated. Or was it the Force he felt, pulsing around him?

Obi-Wan's pale face shimmered before him, then disappeared. At that moment, he saw what Yoda and Tahl had been trying, in their different ways, to tell him. He had not been betrayed by a Jedi. He had been betrayed by a boy. A boy overtaken by passion and circumstance. The boy deserved his understanding. No, he had no secret way to see into a boy's heart.

Perhaps all he needed to do was listen.

"Send Obi-Wan a message," he told Yoda. "I am on my way."

Chapter Sixteen

When Yoda told him via hologram that Qui-Gon was coming, Obi-Wan was overwhelmed. Relief coursed through him, and he felt the first surge of happiness since Cerasi's death.

But immediately, the happiness was replaced by worry. Qui-Gon was coming out of obligation. Would working with a silent, disapproving Qui-Gon be worse than working alone?

Melida/Daan is what's important, Obi-Wan told himself firmly. I have to do what I can for the world Cerasi loved.

It would take days for Qui-Gon to arrive. In the meantime, Obi-Wan had to wait. With time on his hands, there was nothing to do. Thanks to Nield's bitterness, he had been exiled from the Young. Perhaps there were some who disagreed with Nield's tactics, but if so they did not join with Obi-Wan. No one would cross Nield.

Obi-Wan felt as though he were a ghost. He was not allowed to stay in the tunnels, so he slept where he could, or where he happened to find himself at night. Abandoned buildings, public squares, a park littered with the hulls of abandoned speeders. Life swirled around him, but he did not take part in it. Only his belief in Cerasi's cause kept him on the planet.

His only friend was Roenni. She often sought him out, bringing him food. She had given him a survival pack with a glow

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rod, and a medpac, and a warm, lightweight blanket for the cold nights. Obi-Wan was grateful to her for her loyalty, but concerned that if others saw them together, word would get back to Nield.

"He will be angry," he told her. They were sitting in a small park that had been the site of a battle in the last war. Grass struggled to grow amid the bare patches. Only one tree still flourished. The others were just stumps, their branches and trunks blown to bits.

Her warm brown eyes turned suddenly fierce. "I don't care. What he's doing is wrong. Nield is a good person. He'll realize it eventually. Until then, I'll protect you. The way you protected me."

"I don't know if Nield will ever come around," Obi-Wan said, remembering the hatred in his eyes.

"He's out of control because of his grief," Roenni said quietly. "Only you can save the peace, Obi-Wan."

"I can't do anything," Obi-Wan said, defeated. "I can't influence Nield. He won't even talk to me."

"Is that why you called for your Jedi?" Roenni asked. "Can he help Melida/Daan?"

Obi-Wan nodded and touched his river stone. "If anyone can help, it is Qui-Gon Jinn."

He believed in his Master absolutely, even if Qui-Gon didn't believe in him.

At last the day of Qui-Gon's arrival came. Obi-Wan had been instructed to meet him directly outside the gates of the city. He felt a rush of pleasure as he saw Qui-Gon's tall, strong figure stride toward him. A smile of relief sprang to his face.

The smile slowly faded as he saw no answering expression. Of course there was no smile on his Master's face. His *former* Master's face. Obviously, the sight of his former Padawan filled the Jedi Knight with anguish.

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Qui-Gon's expression smoothed and became neutral. He nodded at Obi-Wan.

No greeting. No inquiry into how he was. Fine. Obi-Wan could handle it. He had asked for help, not comfort. He nodded back his own greeting. The two began to walk together into the city.

Obi-Wan waited for Qui-Gon to speak. Why didn't he? If only they could talk about what had happened, if only Qui-Gon would give him a chance to explain.

He knew one thing now. He'd known it the instant he'd seen Qui-Gon. He wanted to be a Jedi again. Not only a Jedi, but the Padawan of Qui-Gon Jinn. He wanted everything he'd thrown away. He wanted his life back.

He didn't belong on Melida/Daan. He had been swept away by a cause. A just cause, a good cause, it was true. But there were other just causes in the galaxy, and he wanted to fight for those, too. It turned out that Cerasi was right. He wanted a wider life than the one he'd chosen on Melida/Daan.

He had found his true path again. That was good. Still, despair filled Obi-Wan. All he had to do was look at Qui-Gon to know that the Jedi would never take him back.

Chapter Seventeen

Qui-Gon had expected the awkwardness. He hadn't expected the pain.

The sight of Obi-Wan's young, hopeful face caused him to feel angry all over again. Qui-Gon struggled against the feeling. He knew he was being harsh.

He couldn't speak. He didn't want Obi-Wan to hear anger in his voice. His first words needed to be calm.

So instead he merely nodded his greeting. He saw that his coolness had hurt the boy. And Obi-Wan had suffered so much hurt already. Slowly, as they walked, Qui-Gon's anger trickled away and compassion took its place.

"I was very grieved to hear your news about Cerasi," he said quietly. "I am truly sorry for your loss, Obi-Wan."

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said in a constricted voice.

"There are many things to talk about," Qui-Gon continued. "But I think such things would be a distraction right now. Any problems we have with each other mean nothing in the face of a planet close to war. We should focus on the problems here."

Obi-Wan cleared his throat. "I agree."

"What is the latest news on Nield and Wehutti?"

"Nield is massing his forces. He has the support of Mawat and the Scavenger Young now. He is trying to get the Middle

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Generation to be allies again. There is a rumor that a battle will start very soon at the site where Cerasi was killed. I know that Wehutti's followers are also arming themselves. Wehutti himself is in seclusion."

Qui-Gon nodded thoughtfully. "Is Wehutti directing his followers, or are they acting on their own?"

"I don't think Wehutti is even in contact with them," Obi-Wan said. "He'll see no one."

"He will see us," Qui-Gon said firmly.

Wehutti's door was locked and bolted. Qui-Gon knocked loudly. There was no answer.

"We know he doesn't want visitors," Qui-Gon said. He withdrew his lightsaber from his belt. "But I don't think we need an invitation."

Qui-Gon activated the lightsaber and used it to cut through the lock. He pushed open the door easily.

The hallway was empty, as were both rooms in the front of the house. Cautiously, they moved up the stairs. They checked one room after another until they found Wehutti in a small back bedroom.

Food trays littered the floor. Thick blankets hung over the windows, cutting out all light. Wehutti sat in a chair pulled up to a window, even though he could not see out of it. He did not turn as they walked into the room.

Qui-Gon walked into Wehutti's field of vision and crouched down in front of him.

"Wehutti, we need to speak with you," he said.

Slowly, Wehutti turned to Qui-Gon. "There was so much confusion. I was prepared to shoot, of course. But I don't think I did."

Qui-Gon glanced at Obi-Wan. Wehutti was reliving the day of Cerasi's death.

"There were more of the Young than we'd thought," Wehutti continued. "We didn't think we'd actually have to use our

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weapons. We didn't think they'd be armed. And I didn't think that my daughter, my Cerasi, would be there. She didn't carry a weapon, did you know that?"

"Yes," Qui-Gon said.

"I had seen her a short time before. She'd come to see me. You didn't know that."

"No, I didn't," Qui-Gon said gently.

"We talked. She wanted me to stop fighting the Young. I argued. It wasn't a good visit. But then... she suggested that we not talk about things as they are, but things as they were. Her childhood. We had a few good years, before the war began again. And I remembered it all suddenly. I hadn't thought about it in so long."

Tears began to fall down Wehutti's cheeks.

"I remembered her mother. I remembered my son. Cerasi was our youngest. She was afraid of the dark. I used to stay in the room until she fell asleep. I sat by her sleep-couch and kept one hand on it so she would know I was there. She would touch my hand from time to time as she fell asleep. I'd watch her," Wehutti whispered. "She was so beautiful."

Suddenly, he bent over in the chair, his forehead hitting his knees.

Great sobs came from his body. "There was so much confusion," he said in a choked voice. "I didn't see her at first. I was looking at Nield. My wife is buried in that Hall. Her ashes lie there. I couldn't let them do it."

"Wehutti, it's all right," Qui-Gon said. "You did what you had to. So did Cerasi."

Wehutti raised his head. "So you say. So you all say," he repeated tonelessly.

"And now your supporters are mobilizing to fight another war," Qui-Gon said. "Only you can stop them. Can you do that, for Cerasi's sake?"

Wehutti turned to Qui-Gon. There was no expression in his eyes, and his face seemed bleached of all color. It glistened with

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the marks of his tears. "And how will that help Cerasi? I don't care about war or battles. I can't stop anything from happening, that's clear. I have no hatred anymore. I have nothing."

"But Cerasi would want you to help," Obi-Wan said.

Wehutti turned toward the window that had no view. "There was so much confusion," he said numbly. "I was ready to shoot. Perhaps I did. Perhaps I killed her. Perhaps I did not. I will never know."

Chapter Eighteen

Obi-Wan felt a sense of hopelessness move through him as they left Wehutti's house. If Wehutti wouldn't interfere, war seemed inevitable.

Qui-Gon walked thoughtfully by his side. Obi-Wan had no idea what he was thinking. But that wasn't unusual. Even when they were Master and Padawan, Qui-Gon often kept his thoughts to himself.

They turned a corner and almost ran into Nield. Startled, Nield quickly skirted them. He did not look at Obi-Wan so much as look through him, as though he were invisible.

Obi-Wan's step faltered. He still wasn't used to the impact of Nield's hatred.

"You said that Nield accused you of being an outsider," Qui-Gon remarked. "Was this just because you opposed his decision to demolish the Halls?"

"That's when it started," Obi-Wan said. "He was angry at Cerasi, too. But things are worse now."

"Since Cerasi's death?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "He... he said that her death was my fault. That I should have been watching out for her instead of trying to save the Hall. He said that because of me, she rushed to the scene that day."

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Qui-Gon looked at him thoughtfully. "And what do you think?"

"I don't know," Obi-Wan whispered.

"Nield has accused you of what he fears he himself did," Qui-Gon said. "If he hadn't been so adamant about the Halls, Cerasi would still be alive. He's also afraid that he killed Cerasi, just as Wehutti is. They are both afraid they fired the fatal shot."

Obi-Wan nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak. He couldn't think of that day without being swamped by feelings of guilt and loss.

Qui-Gon stopped. "Cerasi's death was not your fault, Obi-Wan. You cannot prevent what you cannot see coming. You can only do what you think is right at each moment as you live it. We can plan, hope, and dread the future. What we cannot do is know it."

You can only do what you think is right at each moment as you live it. Was Qui-Gon also talking about Obi-Wan's decision to stay? Hope rose in Obi-Wan. Had he forgiven him?

Qui-Gon began to walk again. "Here we have two grieving people who are secretly afraid they've killed the person they loved most in the world. Perhaps the key to peace is as simple as the answer to a question: Who killed Cerasi? Sometimes whole wars can turn on one tragic loss."

Qui-Gon had not been talking about Obi-Wan's decision. His mind was fixed on the problem at hand. As it should be. He was treating Obi-Wan with compassion, but it was compassion with distance. He hadn't forgiven Obi-Wan.

"But how can we discover who actually fired the shot?" he asked. "Wehutti is right. It was very confusing. Nield and Wehutti were both poised to shoot."

They stopped. Obi-Wan saw with surprise that Qui-Gon had brought him to the plaza where Cerasi was shot.

"Now, Obi-Wan. Tell me what you saw that day," Qui-Gon instructed.

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"Nield and his forces were here," Obi-Wan said, pointing. "Wehutti, there. I stood here. Their weapons were raised and they were trading threats. Cerasi came up through the fountain grate. I saw her..."

Obi-Wan's throat closed. He cleared it and went on. "I couldn't believe she was there. She began to run, and I ran, and I heard the blaster fire...I didn't know where it came from, so I kept on running. I was so afraid, but I couldn't move fast enough, and she fell down. It was so cold and gray. She was shivering--"

"Wait," Qui-Gon barked brusquely. "Stop telling me the story like a grieving friend." He softened his tone. "I know it is hard, Obi-Wan. But I can learn nothing if your emotions color what you say. You must remember without guilt and sorrow. Tell me as a Jedi would. Keep your feelings in your heart. Tell me what your mind saw. Now. Close your eyes."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. It took him a few moments to compose himself. He searched for a clear space to let the memory come. He calmed his mind and slowed his breathing.

"I heard the scrape of the grate before I saw her. I was already turning to the left. She saw everything in one glance. She lifted herself out. As soon as her feet hit the ground, she started to run. She jumped over the wall of the fountain. I turned back to the right for just an instant. Nield was surprised. I saw Wehutti out of the corner of my eye. He..."

Obi-Wan stopped, shocked at the clarity of his memory. "He lowered his blaster," he said with surprise. "He didn't shoot Cerasi."

"Go on," Qui-Gon said.

"I ran, and I lost sight of Nield. I was facing Cerasi, trying to get to her. I saw the sunlight glint on the roof of the building across the square. I remember hoping the reflection wouldn't get in my eyes. I needed to see everything. I heard blaster fire. That's when she fell."

"Open your eyes, Obi-Wan. I have a question for you."

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Obediently, Obi-Wan opened his eyes.

"Didn't you say that the day was gray? Overcast?"

Obi-Wan nodded.

"Then how could sunlight glint on a roof?"

Qui-Gon put his hands on Obi-Wan's shoulders and spun him around. "Look. Up there. Could you have seen someone *on* the roof? Could that glint you saw have been the fire from the barrel of a blaster rifle?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said excitedly. "It could have been."

"And I have another question for you," Qui-Gon continued. "You say the Elders had weapons that day. But that was before they imported them from the countryside. Where did they get them? If you had confiscated all the weapons and kept them in your warehouse, how did the Elders manage to rearm?"

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said. "I assumed they smuggled them in from the country."

Qui-Gon gave a wintry smile. "You assumed? That does not sound like a Jedi."

Obi-Wan tried not to show how crestfallen he felt. Qui-Gon was right. He had been sunk in his own misery. He had lost the discipline of mind that was the goal of every Jedi. Qui-Gon saw that. And now his former Master had even less confidence in him than before.

Chapter Nineteen

To track how the Elders had been armed, Qui-Gon decided to start at the obvious place: the warehouse where the Security Squad had stored the confiscated weapons. Nield must have raided it. But could the Elders have stolen from it as well?

The walk to the warehouse was conducted in silence. There was so much silence between them now, Qui-Gon realized. And it was not the easy silence of companions. He saw the emotions that Obi-Wan struggled to hide. Chief among them was hope that Qui-Gon had forgiven him.

Of course Qui-Gon had forgiven him. He was not sure when it had happened - when he heard Obi-Wan's voice as he reported Cerasi's death, or when his former Padawan had greeted him at the gate with so much hope in his face. Perhaps it had been gradual, but it was there, in his heart, and he knew it.

Qui-Gon did not think of himself as a hard man. Obi-Wan had made an impulsive choice in the heat of a charged moment. It was a choice that he had come to regret. That was part of growing up. Forgiveness was not the point. Qui-Gon had already passed to the next step. Would he take Obi-Wan back if he asked? He did not think so.

But that feeling could change, Qui-Gon told himself, struggling to be honest. It had before. So it was better to wait, to

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say nothing. Obi-Wan must deal with the consequences of his decision. One of them was uncertainty.

The warehouse was deserted, bolted on the outside with a strong lock. Qui-Gon sliced through it with his lightsaber and pushed open the door. A boy and a girl were sitting on the floor of the empty space, talking. They looked up, startled, when Qui-Gon strode in. He recognized the girl as Deila, one of the Young, but did not recognize the stout, round-faced boy.

Deila scrambled to her feet when she saw Obi-Wan. Then she appeared confused. Since Obi-Wan was no longer her leader, she seemed to be thinking, was it right to show him respect? Quickly, she sat down on the guard's chair. The boy made a halfhearted attempt to rise, but Deila shot him a glance and he quickly sat down again.

Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan's face flush. These two had once been his friends. But Nield had drawn a battle line, and they were loyal to him now. Qui-Gon wondered how far such loyalty extended. Why were the two sitting in an empty warehouse behind a barred door? They must have climbed in a window. Were they hiding?

"Hello, Deila," Qui-Gon said in friendly tone. "I'm glad to find you well."

Deila nodded coolly at Qui-Gon. "I am surprised to see you back on Melida/Daan."

"Certain factions on Melida/Daan have called for Jedi assistance," Qui-Gon answered. "I'm here to help."

Deila glanced at Obi-Wan. "I think I know which faction has called for help."

"There are many who still hope for peace," Obi-Wan said. "You were once among them."

Deila flushed. "Peace is always our ultimate objective. What do you want?"

"Just some answers," Qui-Gon said.

"I have none to give."

"I have not asked you a question yet."

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"We're trying to find out how and when the Elders and the Young rearmed themselves," Obi-Wan said. "Did someone take the weapons? Obviously the warehouse has been emptied out." He turned to the boy. "Do you know, Joli?"

"Don't say anything, Joli," Deila said sharply. "We have nothing to say to an outsider."

Qui-Gon leaned closer and fixed Deila with his piercing blue gaze. He could use the Force on this girl, but it would be better to let her own emotions guide her. He sensed uneasiness in her. She respected Obi-Wan. He sensed that, too.

"You know that Obi-Wan fought hard for Melida/Daan," Qui-Gon said. "He shot down every deflection tower in Zehava for you, at great personal risk. He, Nield, and Cerasi devised the strategy that won the war. He fought side by side with you in that war. After peace came, he again risked his life to work for disarmament. If he is an outsider, he was also instrumental in saving your world. Now he continues to risk his life by remaining because he thinks he can help. Why do you show him no respect?"

Fierce Deila crumpled under Qui-Gon's gaze and became a mumbling girl. "I don't know."

"When you don't know your own mind, you fill it with the beliefs of another. Are you so sure that everything Nield says is true?"

Deila glanced at Joli. Perhaps Qui-Gon had raised a question that they had been discussing. Joli nodded at her. "No," she muttered.

"Then will you answer my questions if you can? You can help the cause of peace on Melida/Daan."

Deila glanced at Obi-Wan. She bit her lip. "Of course I want to help the cause of peace."

Qui-Gon signaled to Obi-Wan.

"Where are the weapons?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Mawat took most of them," Deila said. "He moved them to a safer location, he said. I don't know where."

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"Did he rearm Nield and the Young?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon saw Deila's eyes slide to Joli before she nodded. "He heard that the Elders had arms, he said. Nield gave him permission. What could I do? Nield is governor."

So Mawat had just taken what he wanted. He'd known that Obi-Wan would refuse to open the warehouse. But how had the Elders gotten their weapons?

Joli's round face was red. He looked at Deila nervously. "I think we should tell them," he said.

"Be quiet, Joli!" Deila snapped.

"I don't want to fight in a war again!" Joli cried. "You said you didn't either! That's why we're hiding here, remember?"

"What do you want to tell us, Joli?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Mawat armed the Elders that day," Joli burst out.

"Mawat?" Obi-Wan asked, shocked. "But why?"

"Because he *wanted* a confrontation," Qui-Gon guessed. "Isn't that right, Joli?"

Joli nodded. "If a battle broke out, Nield would be held responsible. Mawat wanted to make sure there would be trouble. He... he even put sharpshooters on the roof to start the battle if Nield or Wehutti backed down. He needed war."

"So that he could grab power," Qui-Gon suggested.

"He thinks Nield is weak," Joli said, slumping back against the wall. "Now he's planned another battle."

"Today?" Obi-Wan guessed. "Is that why you're hiding?"

Deila bit her lip. "He tried to recruit us. We hid instead. We don't want to fight. Especially since no one can find Nield. Mawat is planning a big action, but we're not sure what. He's acting on his own. He wanted me to set some explosives. But he doesn't have the authority to start a war with the Elders!"

"I think both Mawat and Nield are crazy," Joli said. "We had peace on our world. Why can't we hold on to it?"

"That is a very good question, Joli," Qui-Gon said. "I wish every planet in the galaxy could answer it."

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"So one of the sharpshooters killed Cerasi," Obi-Wan said as they reached the street. He felt dazed by what he'd learned. "Because of Mawat, she's dead. The funny thing is, Mawat loved Cerasi, too."

"The important thing is that Nield did not kill Cerasi," Qui-Gon said. "He needs to know that, and he needs to know of Mawat's betrayal. Do you know where Nield could be?"

"Any one of a dozen places," Obi-Wan said, thinking. "The tunnels. The park..."

"Let's split up," Qui-Gon said grimly. "We're running out of time." He reached into his cloak and brought out Obi-Wan's lightsaber. He tossed it to Obi-Wan. "Here. I have a feeling you're going to need this."

Obi-Wan's hand curled over the hilt of the lightsaber. As he hefted it, the Force suddenly surged through him. As he slung it into his belt, he lifted his chin and met Qui-Gon's gaze. For the first time since Qui-Gon's arrival, he felt no shame.

It didn't matter what Qui-Gon thought. He was still a Jedi.

Chapter Twenty

Obi-Wan went to Lake Weir, where Nield had spent happy times as a boy. He went to the Unified Congress Building. He went everywhere he could think of until suddenly he stopped dead and knew exactly where Nield was.

He was with Cerasi.

Obi-Wan rushed through the strangely deserted streets. Had the citizens of Zehava heard that a battle was forming? He didn't have time to worry about it.

Obi-Wan arrived at the Hall of Evidence. The entrance was pockmarked with blaster fire and beamdrill holes. He pushed open the door and stepped into darkness. He waited for his eyes to adjust, then walked down the aisle to where Cerasi's marker had been placed.

Nield lay on the floor, one arm curled around Cerasi's marker. A lump rose in Obi-Wan's throat. Any anger he'd felt vanished in an instant. He remembered Cerasi's tales of Nield's childhood. One person after another who loved him had been killed - father, mother, brothers, and a cousin who raised him afterward. He'd become a homeless orphan, afraid to trust or love anyone. Then he'd met Cerasi. If Obi-Wan's grief was terrible, Nield's must be even worse.

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As soon as Nield saw Obi-Wan, he shot to his feet. "How dare you come here," he said shakily.

"I had to find you," Obi-Wan said. "I found out something that you need to know."

"You can't tell me anything I need to know," Nield shot back contemptuously.

"It wasn't you who killed Cerasi," Obi-Wan said quickly.

"You're right - it was you!" Nield cried.

"Nield," Obi-Wan said softly. "You know I miss her, too. We were friends once. What happened? Why do you hate me so much?"

"Because she's dead!" Nield screamed.

Suddenly, he rushed at Obi-Wan. He swung at him with his fists, raining blows on Obi-Wan's head and shoulders. Nield was wiry and strong, but Obi-Wan was larger and stronger, and better trained. It was easy for him to step around Nield, grab his arms and lock them behind his back. Nield tried to twist away.

"Don't struggle, and it won't hurt," Obi-Wan ordered, but Nield continued to try to free himself. "Listen to me, Nield. Mawat is the one who armed the Elders."

Nield stopped struggling.

"He wants a war," Obi-Wan went on. "If it starts, and if the Young don't win, you'll be blamed. I suspect he could be in league with the Elders. He wants to rule Melida/Daan, and he'll make any alliance he can to do it."

"Mawat wouldn't betray me," Nield said.

Obi-Wan ignored the protest. "Mawat wanted the shooting to start the day Cerasi died. He positioned sharpshooters on the roof. They were ordered to fire if you or Wehutti backed down. They *did* fire. That's how Cerasi was killed. It wasn't you. It wasn't Wehutti."

Obi-Wan let go of Nield's arms. Nield turned to face him.

"Mawat has been pressuring me to mobilize," Nield said reluctantly. "I went along at first. After Cerasi... I couldn't think. I could hardly breathe. But something happened to me here, next

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to Cerasi. I saw how wrong I was. How could I have wanted another war? Now I see why he was pushing me."

Obi-Wan heard sounds from outside the Hall. He exchanged a puzzled glance with Nield. There were no windows in the Hall, so they hurried to the front entrance. They peered out the beamdrill holes.

Mawat and a group of Scavenger Young were outside. They were busily placing something against the walls.

"They're wiring it with explosives," Obi-Wan guessed. "They're going to blow it up. That will provoke the Elders. And Mawat will blame it on you, Nield. Everyone will believe it. After all, you're the one who proposed the destruction of the Halls."

"We have to stop them," Nield said.

Obi-Wan noted Nield's unconscious use of "we." He withdrew his lightsaber and activated it. As it shot to life and he saw its pale blue glow, he felt encouragement rush through him.

"We can take them together," he said.

Nield nodded and reached for his vibroblade.

"Good luck," Obi-Wan said.

Slowly, Nield began to grin. "We don't need luck."

"Everybody needs luck."

"Not us."

Nield put his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. Their friendship had risen from ash and smoke. Danger lay outside, but they would face it together.

Weapons held high, they charged outside to meet Mawat.

Chapter Twenty-One

Qui-Gon hoped that Obi-Wan had more success in locating Nield than he did. The tunnels were deserted. Most of the Young had found quarters aboveground by this time.

He lingered in the vault where the Young had based their headquarters before the war. Perhaps there was a clue here that could lead him to Nield. He stood in the small adjoining room where Cerasi had slept with the youngest of the Young. No one had removed her personal effects, but someone had left flowers on her sleeping area with its neatly folded blanket and rolled-up mattress.

Qui-Gon smoothed the blanket with his hand. It seemed very poignant to him. Here Cerasi had tidied up on the last morning of her life. He felt a small bulge in the blanket. He slipped his hand between the folds and discovered a holographic message disk.

Qui-Gon fitted the disk into his holographic message unit. Had Cerasi left one last message behind?

Obi-Wan and Nield threw themselves into the battle. They were outnumbered, but surprise was in their favor.

Their first objective was to prevent Mawat's crew from rigging any more explosive devices. Obi-Wan and Nield attacked

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furiously. The lightsaber felt so right in Obi-Wan's hand. He moved gracefully, his balance perfect, the lightsaber a blur of motion. Nield attacked with his vibroblade, slashing at the equipment boxes and rendering them into piles of scrap. The Scavenger Young dropped the rest of the timing devices and ran.

They beat back the Scavenger Young to a position on the plaza. There, Mawat had already organized the rest of his forces. Obi-Wan and Nield took cover behind the dry fountain. Its curving stone wall hid them from the blaster counterattack. But they would not be able to hold out for long.

"What are we going to do?" Nield asked Obi-Wan, ducking his head as blaster fire pinged into the stone, sending chips flying. "I don't have a blaster, just my vibroblade."

Obi-Wan quickly raised his head, then ducked down again. "We're outnumbered, that's for sure. And Mawat has probably called for reinforcements."

"Well, at least they can't blow up the Hall," Nield said worriedly.

"We'll figure out something," Obi-Wan assured him. But inside, he wasn't so confident. He wished Qui-Gon would appear. Together, they could take on Mawat's forces. But with only one lightsaber, Obi-Wan didn't think he could protect Nield and fight at the same time.

Suddenly, blaster fire erupted behind them. Obi-Wan and Nield turned, startled. Deila, Joli, and Roenni were heading toward them, firing as they came.

"We thought you might need some help," Deila said as she landed next to them behind the fountain wall. "Roenni organized the others. They're going to come at Mawat's forces from the other side."

Just as Deila finished speaking, they saw more of the Young spill into the plaza, surrounding Mawat. At last the odds were even.

"Let's go!" Obi-Wan shouted.

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They leaped up over the fountain wall and ran toward the battle. Blaster fire pinged around them, but Obi-Wan was able to deflect it with his lightsaber. With a sense of deep gratitude, he felt the Force enter and guide him. He moved without having to plan, anticipating where the fire would come.

Mawat whistled, and a squad of Scavenger Young suddenly materialized around a corner. They, too, joined the battle. Lightsaber swinging, Obi-Wan struggled to get to Mawat. If he could capture him, perhaps the battle would end.

A member of the Scavenger Young took aim at Nield with his blaster, and Obi-Wan swooped down, nearly connecting with the boy's wrist. The lightsaber seared his skin, and he let out a howl. He dropped to his knees, his face white with pain.

Nield and Obi-Wan exchanged a quick sorrowful glance. This was the ultimate wrong, the thing they thought could never happen. The Young were fighting each other. And they were doing it right on the spot where Cerasi had died.

As if they'd conjured her up, Cerasi's voice suddenly filled the air.

"I made my decision after the war ended," she said in a strong, clear voice. "I will no longer carry a weapon. I will fight no more in the name of peace. But today I might die for it."

Everyone froze. Obi-Wan felt his heart hammer against his chest. He looked around wildly. He saw Qui-Gon standing on the wall of the fountain. The Jedi held an amplifying device. The Young had used them in the early battles of the war, when they had fooled the Elders into thinking they had more weapons than they did.

Cerasi shimmered in hologram form in the well of the dry fountain. Obi-Wan heard the gasps around him. He looked at the faces, and he saw shock and sadness.

Cerasi had touched so many lives. She had pierced so many hearts. The Young had fought side by side with her, experienced loss and victory with her, had been inspired by her. Now, only she had the power to make them pause and listen.

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"Do me a favor, friends. Don't build any monuments for me. Don't destroy any, either. History isn't in our favor, but that doesn't mean we should annihilate it. Don't let our dream of peace die. Work for it. Don't kill for it. We fought one war for peace. We always said that one war had to be enough."

Cerasi gave the cocky grin that Obi-Wan remembered so well. "Don't mourn too long for me. After all, I wanted peace." She shrugged. "Look at it this way. Now I have it forever."

Cerasi's image disappeared. The plaza was no longer filled with her vibrant presence. But an echo of her love and reason remained.

Beside Obi-Wan, Nield dropped his weapon. Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber. They both stared at Mawat. He stared back defiantly.

One by one, the others in the plaza dropped their weapons. They all turned to Mawat. The defiance drained out of Mawat's face. He dropped his blaster.

The last battle of Zehava was over.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Due to Qui-Gon's skillful negotiation and the power of Wehutti and Nield, a strong peace agreement was reached on Melida/Daan. Nield agreed to share power with the Melida and Daan Elders. No more would the city be divided, by either tribe or age.

Mawat returned to the countryside with a few of his followers. He had seen the city slipping out of Nield's control and saw himself as the savior of Melida/Daan. He had been wrong, and admitted it to Nield and the Young. Cerasi's words had reached him, too.

"Perhaps he can find his own forgiveness in the countryside," Nield said to Obi-Wan.

They stood in front of the fountain on the day of Obi-Wan's departure. He was planning to return to the Temple. He would ask the Council if he could return to the Jedi. Qui-Gon had agreed to accompany him.

Nield flung his arm around Obi-Wan's shoulders. "I gave you a hard time, my friend. It was good of you to find forgiveness in your heart."

"Sorrow can defeat the best of us," Obi-Wan said.

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Nield gazed thoughtfully at the fountain. "I realize now how close I came to turning Melida/Daan back into the bloody battlefield I hated so much. The truth is, Obi-Wan, I was afraid."

Obi-Wan drew back to look at him. "You? Afraid?"

"I felt alone," Nield said simply. "I had a job that was too big for me to handle. I needed guidance, and there was no one to turn to. It seemed to me that every Elder and every member of the Middle Generation had no ideas. But I'm finding that's not true. I was listening to the loudest voices. Now I'm discovering there are others who share our vision of peace for Melida/Daan."

"You've created a new world," Obi-Wan told him.

"*We* did," Nield corrected. "Now I only have one regret."

"Cerasi is not here to see it," Obi-Wan finished gently.

Later, Obi-Wan trudged to the transport next to Qui-Gon. He longed to break the silence. Why was it so awkward now? Such silence was clogged with feelings, he supposed. Feelings that could not be shared.

He had to break it. He had to ask the question that tore at his heart. He was afraid of the answer, but it was worse not knowing.

"Will you ever take me back, Qui-Gon?"

The words hung in the cold air. Qui-Gon didn't answer, but kept on walking.

"I know I am meant to be a Jedi," Obi-Wan added. "I'll never doubt that again."

"I know you are meant to be a Jedi, too," Qui-Gon answered carefully. "But whether you are meant to be my Padawan again is not so clear."

Obi-Wan's heart fell. He knew it was useless to argue with Qui-Gon, or try to persuade him. Desolation filled him. It was not enough to be a Jedi. He had to be Qui-Gon's Padawan. Not because he'd failed him once, and his pride demanded a second chance. It wasn't pride that moved him. Deep in his heart, he felt it was right.

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Yet Qui-Gon did not. Being a Jedi would have to be enough.

Suddenly, Qui-Gon's comlink signaled him. He looked at the message. He paled, and his step faltered.

"What is it?" Obi-Wan asked.

"A message from the Temple," Qui-Gon said gravely. "A message of extreme distress. The Temple is under siege. An attempt has been made to kill Yoda!"

Book Seven
The Captive Temple

Chapter One

The change at the Jedi Temple hit Obi-Wan Kenobi even before he'd stepped inside. The Temple was usually a place of meditation and study, the hushed quiet often interrupted by the sound of soft laughter from behind a closed door, the excited voices of young children, or the faint sound of splashing fountains.

But now the peace is gone, Obi-Wan thought. The quiet felt ominous. It wasn't the quiet of busy souls going about their day. It was the wary hush of a sanctuary under siege.

Obi-Wan stood with his former Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, outside the closed door of the Jedi Council room. At any moment they would be summoned inside. They had been called back to the Temple for the most devastating of reasons - an attack on Jedi Master Yoda's life.

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon. To an observer, Qui-Gon would seem to possess his usual composure. But Obi-Wan knew better. He could sense the sharp distress that ticked underneath the control.

The Temple was on high security. As always it was completely closed to outsiders. But now even Jedi Knights had been ordered to stay away until further notice. All arrivals and departures were monitored, and no one was allowed to leave except on the most

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pressing of missions. Even though most of the Jedi knew Qui-Gon by sight, both he and Obi-Wan had to undergo a retinal scan before entering the Temple from the spaceport level.

Qui-Gon's finger tapped the hilt of his lightsaber, then stopped. His face smoothed out, and Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon was reaching out to the Force to find his center of calm.

Obi-Wan tried to control his own apprehension. He was burning with questions and speculations, but he did not dare break the silence. Relations between him and his former Master had been strained since Obi-Wan decided he couldn't be Qui-Gon's Padawan any longer. He had renounced his Jedi training in order to help the young people of Melida/Daan bring peace to their planet. Obi-Wan realized now what a mistake he had made. He was a Jedi to the bone. All he wanted was to be accepted back into the order and be Qui-Gon's Padawan again.

Qui-Gon had told Obi-Wan that he'd forgiven him for leaving the Jedi. But if Qui-Gon had truly forgiven him in his heart, why was there this awkward silence between them? Qui-Gon was a reserved man, but Obi-Wan had come to count on the respect and warmth he often saw in his former Master's eyes, as well as his occasional flashes of humor.

Obi-Wan knew that once he was called inside the Council chamber, his own fate might be decided. His heart rose at the thought that perhaps the Council had already voted to accept him back. He had told Yoda that he deeply regretted his decision. He hoped that Yoda might have pleaded his case.

Obi-Wan pressed a hand to his forehead. His increasing anxiety had caused him to perspire. Or was the Temple warmer than normal?

He was about to ask Qui-Gon when the door to the Council room hissed open. Obi-Wan stepped into the room behind Qui-Gon. The twelve Council members ringed the chamber in a semicircle. Gray light flooded the room from the large windows overlooking the white towers and spires of Coruscant. Outside, the wispy clouds looked like thin metallic sheets. An occasional

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flash of silver shimmered, the wings of a spacecraft catching a ray of sunshine as the clouds momentarily parted.

Obi-Wan had only been in the Council room a few times. He was always awed by the depth of the Force here. With so many Jedi Masters in one space, the air seemed charged.

Immediately his eyes sought Yoda. He was relieved to see the Jedi Master sitting in his usual place, appearing calm and healthy. Yoda's gaze passed over him neutrally, then focused on Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan felt a twinge of worry. He wished Yoda's glance had been more reassuring.

Qui-Gon took his place in the center of the room, and Obi-Wan joined him.

A senior member of the Council, Mace Windu, did not waste time on preliminaries. "We thank you for coming," he said in his dignified way. His eyebrows knit together worriedly. "To be frank, this event has shaken us.

Master Yoda rose before dawn to meditate, as is his custom. He went to the Room of a Thousand Fountains, again as is his custom. Before reaching a footbridge he sensed a surge in the dark side of the Force. He hesitated, listening to the Force, and in that heartbeat a device planted underneath the footbridge exploded. The intention was to kill Yoda. Luckily he is not so easily fooled."

Mace Windu paused. A collective shudder seemed to run through everyone in the Council room. So many depended on Yoda's wisdom.

"Mace Windu, here with you now am I," Yoda said gently. "Dwell on the *could haves*, we must not. Focus on the solution, we must."

Mace Windu nodded. "Master Yoda saw the flicker of a meditation robe as someone hurried away. This person ducked underneath a waterfall, then disappeared in the churning surf."

"Strong in the dark side, he was," Yoda said, nodding.

"We know that Bruck Chun hasn't left the Temple since you discovered he was the culprit in the thefts," Mace Windu said to

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Qui-Gon. "We still do not know who he has allied himself with. We only know there is an intruder in the Temple."

"Has the person been spotted again?" Qui-Gon asked.

"No," Mace Windu said. He reached for a data sheet on the arm of his chair. "But just this morning, a student found this. It was left outside a meditation chamber."

Qui-Gon took the data sheet from Mace Windu's outstretched hand. He read it, then handed it to Obi-Wan.

MEDITATE ON THIS, MASTERS:
NEXT TIME I WILL NOT FAIL.

Mace Windu placed his hands on each armrest. "Naturally, this has been the focus of consideration and debate. We feel the dark side working. Not only that, but it appears the invader has managed to sabotage our central power structure. You may have noticed the warmer air. We have a perplexing problem with the air cooling unit. Every time Miro Daroon fixes something in the tech center, there is another malfunction elsewhere. There have also been various problems with the lighting and communication systems in some of the wings of the Temple. Miro is hard-pressed to keep up."

Obi-Wan was puzzled. Mace Windu had not looked at him once during his briefing. Why was he here? He wasn't technically a Jedi, since the Council had not extended the offer to take him back. And he certainly wasn't Qui-Gon's Padawan any longer.

At that moment, every face on the Jedi Council turned to him. Mace Windu's intense gaze studied his face. Obi-Wan struggled to remember his Jedi training in composure. It wasn't easy to have twelve Jedi Masters staring at him. And the penetrating gaze of Mace Windu was the most rigorous of all. His dark eyes had a way of making you feel he had seen into the very heart of you, ferreting out secret feelings you weren't even aware you had.

"Obi-Wan, we are hoping that you will have insights into what Bruck Chun can and will do," Mace Windu said heavily.

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"I wasn't his friend," Obi-Wan said, surprised.

"You were his rival," Mace Windu said. "That could be even more valuable to us."

Obi-Wan was at a loss. "But I didn't know Bruck well. I knew how he would move in a lightsaber duel, yes. But not what was in his mind or heart."

No one said anything. Obi-Wan struggled not to betray his apprehension. He had disappointed the Jedi Masters once more. Looking around the room, he did not meet one friendly eye. Even Yoda gave him no encouragement. He wanted to wipe his damp palms on his tunic, but he didn't dare.

"Of course I'll do whatever I can to help," he added quickly. "Just tell me what you want me to do. I can talk to his friends--"

"No need," Mace Windu interrupted. He laced his long fingers together.

"Until a decision is made by the Council, we must ask you not to interfere with Temple business unless we ask you otherwise."

Obi-Wan felt stung. "The Temple is my home!" he cried.

"You are welcome to remain here until your situation is resolved, of course," Mace Windu said. "There is still much discussion to take place."

"But there is a real threat to the Temple," Obi-Wan argued. "You need help. And I wasn't here during the petty thefts. I'm one of the few Jedi students who can be ruled out as a suspect. Someone could have helped Bruck. I could investigate."

Obi-Wan saw with a sinking feeling that he had made a mistake. He should have known better than to ask the Council to take him back based on the fact that he could be of use to them in a crisis.

Mace Windu's sharp gaze cut him like ice. "I think the Jedi can manage to solve the crisis without that kind of help from you."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said. "But I wish to tell all the Jedi Masters that I feel genuine remorse for my decision. It felt right at the time, but I've come to see how wrong it was. I want

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nothing more than to have back what I once had. I want to be a Padawan. I want to be a Jedi."

"Have again what you had, you cannot," Yoda said. "Different you are. Different is Qui-Gon. Every moment makes you so. Every decision a cost it has."

Ki-Adi-Mundi spoke up. "Obi-Wan, you have violated not only the trust of Qui-Gon, but the trust of the Council. You seem not to recognize this."

"But I do!" Obi-Wan exclaimed. "I take responsibility for it and I'm sorry for it."

"You are thirteen years old, Obi-Wan. You are not a child," Mace Windu said with a frown. "Why do you speak as one? Sorry does not make the offense disappear. You interfered in the internal affairs of a planet without official Jedi approval. You defied the order of your Master. A Master depends on the loyalty of the Padawan, just as the Padawan depends on the Master. If that trust is broken, the bond shatters."

The sting of Mace's words made Obi-Wan wince. He did not expect the Council to be so severe. He couldn't look at Qui-Gon. His gaze found Yoda's.

"Unclear your path is, Obi-Wan," Yoda said with more gentleness. "Hard it is to wait. But wait you must to see your way revealed."

"You may go, Obi-Wan," Mace Windu said. "We must speak with Qui-Gon privately. You may go to your old quarters."

Well, at least that's something, Obi-Wan thought. He struggled to maintain his dignity as he bowed to the Council. But he knew his cheeks burned with shame as he left the room.

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan felt relieved as the door hissed behind him. He couldn't face the Masters for one more second. Never in his expectations had he thought his first meeting would go so badly.

He saw a slight figure at the end of the hall, and some of his anxiety lifted. "Bant!" he called.

"I was waiting for you." Bant came toward him, her silver eyes alight. Her salmon skin glowed against a soft blue tunic.

"It's good to see a friend," Obi-Wan admitted.

Bant peered at him. "It did not go well."

"It could not have gone worse."

She slipped her arms around Obi-Wan and hugged him. Obi-Wan caught the scent of salt and sea, a unique scent he always associated with Bant, for on Bant, even salt smelled sweet. As a Calamarian, she was amphibious, needing moisture to live. Her room was kept filled with steam, and she took several swims a day.

"Let's go," Bant murmured.

He didn't have to ask where. They took the lift tube down to the lake level. It was their special spot. After long days of classes and training, there was nothing Bant liked better than to immerse herself in the water for a long swim. Obi-Wan often joined her,

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or sometimes sat on the bank, watching her gracefully glide underneath the green water.

They exited the lift tube and walked out to what seemed to be a beautiful sunny day on the surface of the planet. But they both knew that the golden sun set in a blue sky was actually a series of illumination banks set high in the domed ceiling. The ground under their feet had been planted with flowering shrubs and leafy trees. Today the lake area was deserted. Obi-Wan could not see anyone swimming, or walking along the many trails.

"Students have been asked to stay in their quarters or the dining halls and meditation rooms if they are not in their classes," Bant said. "It is not an order, merely a request. The attack on Yoda has made us all cautious."

"It was a shocking thing," Obi-Wan said.

"But what about you?" Bant asked. "What did the Council say?"

Bitterness rose in Obi-Wan. "They will not take me back."

Bant looked startled. "They said this?"

Obi-Wan stared out at the lake, his eyes burning. "Well, no, not in those words. But their attitude was very severe. I must wait, they say. Bant, what am I going to do?"

She gazed at him, her large silver eyes full of compassion. "Wait."

He turned away impatiently. "You sound like Yoda."

She put a hand on his arm. "But Obi-Wan, what you did was a serious offense. Not serious enough to get kicked out forever," she added quickly when she saw the look in his eyes. "But the Council will need to see proof of your sincerity. They will need to meet with you several times. They are compassionate, Obi-Wan, but they have the whole Jedi order to protect. It is good that this is so. The Jedi path can be a hard one, and the Council must be sure that your commitment is absolute. That the commitment of *each* of us is absolute."

"My commitment *is* absolute," Obi-Wan said fiercely.

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"How can the Council be sure of this, and how can Qui-Gon be sure?" Bant asked with great gentleness. "For you have said that before, when you first joined him."

Anger filled Obi-Wan, an anger fueled by frustration. He knew that Bant did not want to hurt him. She gazed at him now with concerned, loving eyes, afraid she had offended him.

"I see," he said shortly. "You blame me, too."

"No," she said quietly. "I am telling you that it will take more time than you wish it to take, maybe more time than you think you will be able to bear. But the Council will relent and see what I see."

"And what is that?" Obi-Wan asked, scowling. "An angry boy? A fool?"

"A Jedi," she said softly, and it was the best thing she could have said.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan was struck by a thought. What if the Council took him back, but Qui-Gon did not? If the Council allowed him to remain a Jedi student, he was already thirteen and past the limit to be chosen by a Jedi Knight as a Padawan. Who would ask him, if not Qui-Gon?

He didn't want another Master, Obi-Wan thought in despair. He wanted Qui-Gon.

They had walked to the far side of the lake without Obi-Wan noticing. Here there was a small cove where Bant loved to wade. She stepped into the water, smiling as the coolness washed over her ankles.

"Tell me about Melida/Daan," she said. "No one knows what happened there. What was it that made you commit to their cause and leave us?"

Obi-Wan froze. Perhaps it was the trace of the smile on Bant's face as she asked the question. Perhaps it was the way the light hit the water, or the way her silver eyes gazed at him trustingly. Perhaps it was the amount of life in that small moment, so beautiful that it blinded him.

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He could not tell her about Cerasi. With so much life around him, how could he speak of death?

Obi-Wan was suddenly at a loss for words. He had never had trouble talking to Bant before. But what could he say?

On Melida/Daan, I saw a friend die in front of me. I saw the life in her eyes flicker and dim. I held her in my arms. I felt another beloved friend turn his back on me. A comrade in arms betrayed me. And I betrayed my Master. A string of betrayals and a death that has marked my heart forever.

He could not say any of those things. They lay too deeply in his heart.

When this is over, I'll tell her. When we have time.

"But I want to hear about you," he said, changing the subject. "You look different. Have you grown since I saw you?"

"Maybe a little," Bant said, pleased. Her short height had always bothered her. "And I'm eleven now."

"Soon you'll be a Padawan," Obi-Wan teased.

Bant did not catch his teasing tone. Her eyes were serious as she nodded. "Yes. Yoda and the Council think I am ready."

Obi-Wan was startled. Because of her small size and trusting nature, Bant had always seemed even younger than she was. She had always tagged after him and his best friends Reeft and Garen Muln. "You're young to be chosen," he said.

"It is not age but ability that marks a turning point," Bant answered.

"Now you sound like Yoda again."

Bant giggled. "I am quoting Yoda."

"And what about Garen?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Garen is taking an extra tutorial in piloting," Bant answered. "Yoda thinks his reflexes are especially acute. The Jedi need pilots for missions. He's taking his lesson now in the simulator, or he would have come to see you."

"And where's Reeft?" Obi-Wan asked with a smile. "The dining hall?"

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Bant laughed. Their Dresselian friend was known for greedy enjoyment of food. "He was chosen as the Padawan of Binn Ibes. He's off on his first mission."

A pang shot through Obi-Wan. So Reeft was a Padawan now. Bant would be soon. Garen had been chosen for special missions. All of his friends were moving forward as he stood still. No, worse than that. As he moved backward. He had been the first to leave the Temple. Now he would be standing on the landing platform, waving to his friends as they departed, one after the other. He turned away so that Bant couldn't see the longing on his face.

"What about Qui-Gon?" Bant asked. "Do you know if he'll take you back once the Council does?"

Leave it to Bant. She always managed to get to the truth of the issue. Since she spoke what was in her heart, she expected others to do the same.

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said. He bent down to trail a hand in the water, trying to hide his face.

"You know, I thought he was forbidding at first," Bant remarked. "I was a little afraid of him. But I came to see how gentle he is. I'm sure the way will be smoothed between you."

"I didn't know you knew Qui-Gon at all," Obi-Wan said, surprised.

"Oh, yes," Bant said. "I helped him and Tahl with the theft investigation when you were on Melida/Daan."

Curious now, Obi-Wan turned to ask her what she had done, but a strange noise interrupted him. Bant and Obi-Wan looked overhead. A grinding noise filled the air.

They stared up. At first they saw only what they were meant to see: a brilliant sun in a blue sky. Then everything seemed to happen at once. There was a dimming in the light, and suddenly, an object crashed down through the sky, which they could now see was only a scrim. The skeletal forms of catwalks and the blocks of illumination banks were revealed. Part of a horizontal tunnel swung in midair.

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"It's the horizontal turbolift," Bant said, horrified. "It's going to crash!"

Chapter Three

Obi-Wan saw everything in a flash, but with the clarity of slow motion. The turbolift ran horizontally high above, crossing above the lake and surrounding trails. Normally, it was hidden from view by the glare from the giant illumination banks. But a portion of the lift had fallen through its shaft, knocking out a bank of lights.

"The repulsorlift engines must have blown," Obi-Wan guessed. "It's hanging by a thread."

"That turbolift links the nursery and care centers for the younger children to the dining halls," Bant said, her eyes on it. "It could be filled with children." She wrenched her eyes away.

"I don't have my comlink," Obi-Wan said quickly. "It was damaged on Melida/Daan."

"I'll go," Bant decided. "You stay in case ... in case it falls."

Bant streaked away. Obi-Wan knew she was heading for the comm unit at the entrance to the lake level. He could not tear his eyes from the turbolift. The shaft swayed slightly. Any moment it could plunge into the lake below.

But the turbolift held.

He couldn't stand around and do nothing. Obi-Wan scanned the tech area overhead. He hadn't realized what a maze of

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catwalks it was. If the children could climb out of the turbolift, they could escape over the catwalks to the tech service level....

The thought flashed across his mind and he sprinted toward the tech door hidden in the foliage. He burst through and pressed the button for the vertical lift tube. Nothing happened. Obi-Wan turned and saw a narrow staircase heading up. He took the stairs two at a time, his legs pumping, his muscles tiring as the long climb went on. Still he did not falter.

At last he burst out onto the top level. A tunnel led to a series of doors marked with numbers: B27, B28, B29, and on and on. Which door would lead to a catwalk closest to the damaged turbolift?

Obi-Wan paused. His heart was beating furiously. He wanted to charge ahead, but he would waste precious time if he didn't think this through. He oriented himself to the floor below, picturing where the turbolift hung. Then he quickly walked down the tunnel past the doors until he felt he was close to where the lift would be. He pressed the button marked ACCESS on door B37. The door hissed open and he stepped out onto a small landing.

The turbolift still hung precariously out in the middle of the giant space. If he followed the catwalk, it would bring him close to the part of the shaft that was still intact. He could cut a hole in it with his lightsaber by leaning over the catwalk railing. Then he would have to hoist himself into the shaft and walk a short distance to the turbolift.

If the shaft didn't break free because of his weight. ..

Obi-Wan knew he would have to take the chance. Peering over the catwalk, he could see that Bant hadn't arrived with help. If the service lift tube was out of order, perhaps the comm unit was as well.

Quickly he moved down the catwalk. Massive illumination banks surrounded him. Peering through them, he could see the glint of the lake far below. Even the tallest trees seemed impossibly small from this height.

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When he reached the area of the shaft that curved close to the catwalk, Obi-Wan powered up his lightsaber. Carefully and slowly, he carved an opening in the shaft. He did not want the peeled metal to fall back into the shaft itself. Then he returned his lightsaber to his belt.

He climbed over the railing. Now there was nothing between him and the lake hundreds of meters below. He could not hear any noise from the turbolift, but he felt the ripples of distress and fear. He could sense that children were trapped inside.

Obi-Wan slid himself halfway into the shaft. Without letting go of the railing, he tested his weight. The shaft didn't wobble, or make a noise. It would hold him. He eased off the catwalk, ready to spring back if the shaft began to swing. But it didn't move.

He would have to move slowly. If he ran, the vibration could jostle the shaft and it could break free. Obi-Wan closed his mind against the dark lake below, the image of trapped children falling. He began to walk. The shaft was dark, and he activated his lightsaber for illumination. Ahead he could see the bulky form of the turbo-lift. As he drew closer, he could hear the deep voice of a Jedi caretaker and the occasional murmuring of the children.

His progress was agonizingly slow, but he reached the turbolift wall at last. He tapped on it.

"It's Obi-Wan Kenobi," he called. "I'm in the turbolift shaft."

"It's Ali-Alann," the deep voice said. "I am the children's caretaker."

"How many are inside?"

"Ten children and myself."

"Help is on the way."

Ali-Alann's voice had not a trace of nerves in it. "The repulsorlift engines malfunctioned one by one. Only one holds us. The comm unit is not working. The escape hatch will not open. I don't carry a lightsaber."

Obi-Wan knew what Ali-Alann was telling him. The last repulsorlift engine could go at any time. They were trapped.

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"Keep the children away from this wall," Obi-Wan directed him.

Again moving more slowly than he liked, Obi-Wan cut a hole in the turbolift wall. The metal peeled back but did not separate from the lift itself. Good. Obi-Wan held his lightsaber like a torch. The glow revealed the upturned, serious faces of the children and the evident relief on Ali-Alann's face.

"We have to move very slowly," Obi-Wan told Ali-Alann, then shifted to a low voice so that the children would not overhear. "The shaft is precarious. I'm not sure how much weight it can hold."

Ali-Alann nodded. "We'll bring them out one at a time then."

The process was agonizingly slow. The children were all under four years of age. They could walk, of course, but Obi-Wan thought it better to carry them. Ali-Alann handed him the first child, a small human girl who trustingly wound her arms around Obi-Wan's neck.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Her red hair was braided in coils around her head, and her brown eyes were serious. "Honi. I'm almost three."

"Well, Honi-who-is-almost-three, hang on to me."

She pressed her head against his chest. Obi-Wan walked back down the shaft. When he got to the opening, he held Honi against him with one hand and reached out to grab the catwalk railing with the other. It would require perfect balance to make the move to the catwalk.

He heard the sound of footsteps. In another instant Qui-Gon stood across from him on the catwalk. He held out his arms. "I can take the child."

Obi-Wan swung out as Qui-Gon reached and safely passed Honi to him.

"There are nine children left, and Ali-Alann," he said.

"The Masters are below," Qui-Gon told him. "They are using the Force to keep the turbolift aloft."

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Now Obi-Wan could feel it: a tremendous wave in the Force, strong and deep. He glanced below. The Council members stood in a ring, their focus on the turbolift.

"But I would not dawdle, just the same," Qui-Gon said dryly as he turned to bring Honi to safety.

Obi-Wan made his way back to the turbolift. One by one, he carried out the children. One by one, he handed them to Qui-Gon. The children were already trained in calmness and the Force. Not one whimpered or cried, although some had to try hard not to. Trust was in their eyes and the relaxed posture of their bodies as they allowed themselves to be carried and handed over a gap to the tiny catwalk hundreds of meters above the lake.

When only two children were left, Ali-Alann carried one to safety while Obi-Wan took the last, a young boy only two years old. Obi-Wan waited while Ali-Alann walked down the shaft. He heard the shaft creak and felt it wobble as Ali-Alann slowly made his way toward the catwalk. The Jedi was tall and strong, with a similar build to Qui-Gon's. Obi-Wan could sense the weakening of the shaft as Ali-Alann moved.

At last he handed over the child and swung himself onto the catwalk. Obi-Wan made the trip for the last time. With every step, he felt the shaft sway. Yet he knew that if he ran, it could break away completely. He handed the child to Qui-Gon and swung himself onto the catwalk. The shaft swayed but did not break. He looked down below and saw the Jedi Masters in a ring, concentrating on the shaft high above their heads.

Jedi Knights had already carried the children downstairs in relays. Obi-Wan followed Ali-Alann and Qui-Gon down the long, winding staircase to the lake level. Sweet relief coursed through him. The children were safe.

He walked behind Qui-Gon to the lakefront where the Masters were waiting. Bant held a child in her arms, talking to him quietly, and Yoda placed a hand on the head of one of the children. The atmosphere was being kept calm so that the children would not be frightened by their experience.

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"You did well, children," Mace Windu said, flashing them a rare smile. "The Force was with you."

"And Ali-Alann was there, too," Honi spoke up earnestly. "He told us stories."

Smiling, Mace Windu patted her hair. "Ali-Alann will take you to the dining hall now. But not on the turbolift."

The children laughed. They clustered around Ali-Alann, obviously adoring their large, gentle caretaker.

"Well you handled this, Ali-Alann," Yoda told him. The Council members nodded.

"The Force was with us," Ali-Alann repeated. He led the children away.

"And you, young Bant," Mace Windu continued, turning to her. "You are to be commended as well. You stayed calm when you found the comm unit was dead on the lake level. Your speed in getting help was admirable."

"Any of us would have done the same," Bant answered.

"No, Bant," Qui-Gon said warmly. "It was wise to come straight to the Council room. And your calmness in the face of great peril was true to the Jedi way."

Bant colored. "Thank you. My wish was to help the children."

"As you did," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan felt a stab of jealousy and longing. The warmth in Qui-Gon's eyes and voice was unmistakable. Obi-Wan waited for the Council to notice him. It wasn't as though he had rescued the children in order to win praise. But he couldn't help feeling glad that he had been given an opportunity to come to the aid of the Temple. At least the Council had seen a better side of him.

"As for you, Obi-Wan," Mace Windu said, turning to him, "you are to be thanked for your rescue of the children. You showed quick thinking."

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to answer with humility, as a Jedi should. But Mace Windu kept talking.

"However," he continued, "you also showed that impulsiveness is your flaw. The same flaw that has led us to

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hesitate about your suitability to be a Jedi. You acted alone. You did not wait for help and direction. You could have endangered the children needlessly. The shaft could have broken free."

"But I tested my weight, and I moved carefully. A-And help was not arriving--" Obi-Wan said, stuttering. He was stunned that the Council had found fault with him.

Mace Windu turned away. Obi-Wan's own voice echoed in his ears, and he realized that he sounded as though he were stammering out excuses. Bant looked at him with compassion.

"Please do not interfere again," Mace Windu said. "The Council will now discuss what is to be done about the shaft. We must close down the wing."

Qui-Gon put his hand on Bant's shoulder. The two followed the Council members from the lake.

Obi-Wan stood, watching them go. He did not think this day could get any worse. Now it had. In the eyes of the Council, he could do nothing right.

And in Qui-Gon's eyes, he was worth nothing at all.

Chapter Four

They were too hard on him, Qui-Gon thought as he left Bant and proceeded to his meeting with Yoda. Obi-Wan had acted impulsively, yes - but Qui-Gon would have done the same. He couldn't interfere with the Council's admonishment, however. And he had come to trust their wisdom in such matters. No doubt it was better for Obi-Wan to reflect on his impulsiveness, since that was what led him to leave the path of the Jedi in the first place. Mace Windu, Yoda, and the Council always had a reason behind their severity. So although he wanted to stay with Obi-Wan, he had left him so that the boy could think about what Mace Windu had said.

Obi-Wan had taken a chance. No doubt about that. Qui-Gon's steps faltered momentarily as he recalled how he felt when he arrived at the lake and realized that Obi-Wan was in the turbolift shaft. A deep sense of dread had pierced him. What if the shaft had broken free before the Masters had arrived? What if Obi-Wan had perished? Qui-Gon's heart stopped at the thought.

His hurried pace resumed. He had learned much over the past weeks about how the heart could surprise you. He was beginning to realize just how intricate and deep the bonds were between him and his former Padawan.

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But he must focus on the problem at hand. Whatever needed to be resolved must wait.

Yoda stood in the middle of the empty white space of the safe room in the central tower, where no surveillance could possibly penetrate.

"Confirmed it is by Miro Daroon," he told Qui-Gon. "Sabotage it was. A timing device in the repulsorlift engines, and a bug in the central core that shut down the lift tubes and comm units in the area. Find this person we must, Qui-Gon. After the children now, he is. Strange I find it that Bruck could be involved in such a thing," Yoda brooded.

"The last repulsorlift engine held," Qui-Gon pointed out. "I do not think the turbolift was meant to fall."

Yoda turned to him. "Taunting us, the intruder is? Endangering the lives of babies for a joke?"

"Or there is some other motive," Qui-Gon said. "It's not clear to me yet. At first I thought the petty thefts were designed strictly to irritate and tease. Now I wonder otherwise. The stolen items appear to have served various purposes. The toolbox from the servo-utility unit was most likely used to dismantle the repulsorlift engines. The teacher's meditation robe was used for the intruder to travel about freely, especially in the early morning when most Knights meditate."

"And the fourth year student's sporting gear?" Yoda asked.

"No significance yet," Qui-Gon said. "And then there are the stolen school records. Only students with names A through H. Bruck's last name is Chun. I'm certain the records were stolen to conceal something about him."

Yoda nodded. "Time it will take, to regather information. Something you do not know, Qui-Gon - a sensitive time for the Jedi this is. A secret mission for the Senate we have undertaken. Held in our Jedi treasury is a large shipment of vertex."

Qui-Gon could not keep the surprise from his face. Vertex was a highly valuable mineral. After the raw substance was

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mined, it was cut into crystals of various shapes for currency. Many worlds used crystalline vertex instead of credits.

"Unprecedented it was, to accept such a shipment," Yoda agreed, noting Qui-Gon's surprise. "Yet the Council thought it best. Two star systems there are, locked in conflict over the shipment. Agree to peace talks they would not, unless a neutral party held the shipment. Almost concluded, the peace agreement is. If word there is that the Temple is vulnerable, war there would be." Yoda's voice dropped in concern. "A large war it would be, Qui-Gon. Many alliances these star systems have."

Qui-Gon digested this information. It often struck him that even while the Temple was a haven, it was connected to the galaxy in so many intricate ways.

"There is no time to waste," he told Yoda. "I will start with Miro Daroon. I must discover how Bruck and this intruder manage to navigate around the Temple without being seen. I'll need to coordinate with Tahl."

Yoda blinked at him. "And Obi-Wan?"

"The Council has ordered Obi-Wan to stay out of this," Qui-Gon answered, surprised.

"Predict I do that the boy will find a way to offer his help again," Yoda said.

"And I should refuse?"

Yoda waved an arm. "Directly involved the boy should not be. But shut him out, I would not."

Qui-Gon smiled grimly as he hurried away. It was contradictory advice, typical of Yoda. Yet the Master's advice somehow always turned out to make perfect sense.

Qui-Gon took a shortcut through the Room of a Thousand Fountains in order to reach the lift tube that would take him directly to the tech center. He walked purposefully through the winding paths, barely noticing his surroundings, intent on the problem at hand.

Then he saw the destroyed footbridge where the attack on Yoda had taken place. Qui-Gon stopped, his gaze on the

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splintered bridge, his thoughts suddenly in the past. Years ago, he had a mission to stop a tyrant from taking over a world in the Outer Rim. The tyrant's strategy was based on a simple equation: Disruption + Demoralization + Distraction = Devastation.

That was the pattern, Qui-Gon realized. The thefts had followed the formula. Disruption: the petty thefts disrupted classes and activities. Demoralization: the theft of the Healing Crystals of Fire and the attack on Yoda had caused many students to lose heart. Distraction: the failing of the cooling system, the security breaches, and the destruction of one of the main turbolifts meant that the Jedi had to focus to keep the Temple running. Was the same evil formula working to dismantle the Temple? That tyrant was dead, killed years ago, but had he spread his equation of evil?

Suddenly, Qui-Gon felt a deep disturbance in the Force. It cleaved the air in front of him. The solid rocks seemed to shimmer.

The dark side was here.

The feeling lingered. The fountains continued to flow, the spray from rushing water still cooling his cheeks. He surveyed the area carefully, noting every leaf, every shadow. He saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Yet he knew something was there.

Chapter Five

Obi-Wan decided he needed a new comlink. What if something happened in front of his eyes again, and he needed to summon help? Or suppose Qui-Gon or the Council changed their minds and needed him?

It could be wishful thinking, but I don't care, Obi-Wan thought. *I have to think like a Jedi, even if the Council doesn't want me to.*

Instead of heading to his quarters, Obi-Wan started toward the tech center. He was sure that Miro Daroon would let him have a new comlink.

Ahead of him, he saw a familiar figure striding down the hall, munching on a piece of muja fruit as she walked. It was Siri, a fellow student. He didn't know her very well, but he knew she'd been a friend of Bruck's. Maybe if he questioned her, she could come up with a clue about Bruck. He could return to the Council with the information.

He called her name, and she stopped and turned. The impact of her blue eyes was like a cresting wave. Siri had always been striking, but she hated to have anyone comment on her good looks. She kept her blond hair in a close-cropped style, swept straight off her forehead. The boyish style was probably intended to dim her beauty but instead only enhanced her intelligent eyes and glowing skin.

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When she realized who'd called her name, Siri's friendly expression cooled. Obi-Wan wondered why. They had never been friends, but they'd been friendly. Siri was two years younger than Obi-Wan, but her abilities had landed her in Obi-Wan and Bruck's lightsaber class. She had been a worthy opponent. Obi-Wan considered her style athletic and highly focused. Unlike other students, she never got distracted during a duel by emotions such as anger or fear, and she never involved herself in petty rivalries. Privately, Obi-Wan had always thought of her as a little *too* focused. She never seemed to relax or join in the jokes and fun that students enjoyed in their downtime.

"Obi-Wan Kenobi," Siri said flatly. "I heard you were back." She took a bite of fruit.

"Siri, you were a friend of Bruck's," Obi-Wan said urgently. "Did you notice any signs of anger or rebellion in the past few months? Or anything out of the ordinary?"

Siri chewed, staring at him, not answering.

Obi-Wan shifted uncomfortably. He realized too late that these days, being Bruck's friend was not exactly a benefit around the Temple. He had blurted out the question without thinking, eager for answers and mindful of the time pressure. He supposed he should have phrased the question more diplomatically.

While he was trying to think of a better opening, Siri swallowed. She spun the muja fruit in her hand, searching for the next place to bite.

"What's it to you?" she asked.

Her rudeness surprised him, and Obi-Wan struggled not to snap back. "I want to help Qui-Gon find Bruck and the intruder-" he began patiently.

"Wait a second," Siri interrupted. "I thought Qui-Gon Jinn dumped you. And you dumped the Jedi."

Annoyance filled Obi-Wan. "I didn't 'dump' the Jedi," he said irritably. "And as for Qui-Gon, we ..." Obi-Wan stopped. He didn't owe Siri an explanation! She stood there, chewing on her

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fruit and staring at him as though he were a lab experiment. "You shouldn't listen to gossip," he told her.

"So why do you want me to gossip about Bruck?" Siri shot back coolly. She took another bite of the muja.

Fuming, Obi-Wan took a breath. The interview wasn't going well, that was for sure. "The Temple is under siege," he said, struggling to keep his voice even. "I'd think you'd want to help."

Siri's cheeks flushed. "I don't have to help you, Obi-Wan. You're not even a Jedi. But for your information, I wasn't a friend of Bruck's. He just used to hang around, trying to copy my lightsaber moves. He knew I was a better fighter than he was. So does the rest of the class. I thought he was a bore. He was always trying to impress me. That about sums up our supposed 'friendship,' all right?"

"All right," Obi-Wan said. "But if you think of anything--"

"And another thing," Siri interrupted, her eyes shooting sparks at him. "I *do* care about the Temple. You're the one who left the Jedi. When you did that, you cast doubt on the commitment of all Padawans, present and future. You made all Jedi Knights question whether we're as committed as we should be. You're almost as bad as Bruck!"

Siri's words hit his cheeks like slaps from an open hand. Color rushed to Obi-Wan's face. Was this what the other students felt? That he had betrayed them?

Obi-Wan hadn't considered before that his action could cast doubt on the commitment of all Padawans. Faced with a similar situation, would he offer to help someone who had done what he had done?

With every encounter at the Temple, Obi-Wan received a wider picture of the consequences of his decision to stay on Melida/Daan. Now he realized that his action had left a wider pool of ripples than he'd thought.

A decision is yours alone to make. Yet remember you should that you make it also for the silent ones who stand at your shoulder.

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How many times had he heard Yoda say that? Now the meaning was so clear that it mocked him with its simplicity. He understood completely what Yoda had meant. He should have understood it before.

Siri seemed to regret her words. Her cheeks flushed almost as deeply as Obi-Wan's.

"If you can think of anything that might help, please see Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan said stiffly.

"I will," Siri murmured. "Obi-Wan--"

But he couldn't bear to hear an apology or an excuse. Siri, he knew, had blurted out exactly what was in her heart.

"I have to go," Obi-Wan interrupted, and hurried away.

Chapter Six

Qui-Gon stood in the tech center next to Miro Daroon. Around them curved a blue screen that ran along the wall in the circular room. The screen flashed diagrams of every tunnel, service hallway, catwalk, and duct in the Temple .

At first, the schematic drawings had seemed like a maze to Qui-Gon. But with Miro's help he had soon understood the logic of the diagrams. But logic hadn't helped to find the intruder. There were dozens of tunnels tall enough for someone Bruck's height to walk upright inside. Ducts were placed conveniently on every floor, giving outlets to every area of the Temple except those under the most severe security restrictions, such as the treasury room.

The problem wasn't discovering a way for the intruder to navigate. The problem was narrowing it down. Qui-Gon had already called the Jedi Knight Tahl, his partner in the investigation, to send out search teams to comb the infrastructure. But that would take time - time they didn't have. He was still hoping for a clue.

Behind them, the door hissed open. Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan in the reflection on the screen. He saw the boy catch sight of him and pause.

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"Have any additional problems cropped up?" Qui-Gon quickly asked Miro.

He wanted Obi-Wan to remain, but couldn't ask him. That would violate the wishes of the Council. But he felt that if he and Miro discussed Temple problems and Qui-Gon didn't ask him to leave, Obi-Wan would stay.

So this is what Yoda meant, Qui-Gon thought.

Miro sighed. He was a tall alien from the planet Piton, thin as a reed, with a high forehead and pale, almost white eyes. Pitons lived underground on their own planet. They had little pigment in their skin that was almost translucent. They were hairless, and Miro wore a cap and tinted eye shields to protect his eyes from glare.

"When I tried to restore power to the service lift tubes in the lake area, the air circulation failed in the north wing. We have to move all the students to temporary quarters in the main building."

In the screen reflection, Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan studying the diagrams.

"So now two wings of the Temple have been shut down," Qui-Gon murmured thoughtfully. "You must be very frustrated, Miro."

Miro's mournful face collapsed in a deeper frown than the one he already wore. "Frustrated doesn't cover it, Qui-Gon. I know this system inside and out. But when I fix one problem, three more pop up. It's difficult to keep up. I've never seen such intricate sabotage, not even in hypothetical models. My last resort would be to shut the whole system down to run my own program. That's something I don't want to do."

Qui-Gon felt bothered by this news. Miro was a brilliant, intuitive tech expert. Anyone who could confound him must be a tech genius. Bruck certainly wasn't capable of this. It seemed he was searching for a slippery being with a hatred of the Jedi, a knack for subterfuge, and now a technological wizard as well.

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Qui-Gon drew in a quick, startled breath. The knowledge had been in the back of his mind for some time, cold and insidious, like water seeping into the cracks of a boulder. Now it froze into certainty, blasting the rock to smithereens.

"Xanatos," he murmured.

Obi-Wan gave a start. Miro looked at Qui-Gon, shocked. "You think Xanatos is involved?"

"It's possible ..." Qui-Gon murmured.

The clues had ticked away for a while now. He had sensed a vengeful, personal motive in this operation. Xanatos held an implacable hatred for the Jedi - a hatred that was only surpassed by his hatred for Qui-Gon. And then there was that feeling he'd had in the Room of a Thousand Fountains...could Xanatos have been nearby?

Disruption + Demoralization + Distraction = Devastation.

During that mission, Xanatos had been his Padawan. He had been a boy of sixteen. He could have easily remembered the formula.

"I remember him," Miro said quietly. "He was a year behind me. But he was the only Jedi student who was better at constructing tech infrastructure models."

Qui-Gon nodded. The young Jedi student's mind had been what had first attracted Qui-Gon, first made him wonder if he would make a good Padawan.

In that instant, Qui-Gon made a decision. He was not allowed to involve Obi-Wan in the investigation. But things had changed. He turned and acknowledged Obi-Wan for the first time.

"I need your help," he said.

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan stood frozen, surprised at Qui-Gon's words.

"I need to see Tahl and report all this," Qui-Gon said. "I'd like you to come along."

"But the Council--"

"It is my investigation," Qui-Gon said firmly. "You have faced Xanatos before. You could be helpful. So come."

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon into the corridor. He walked beside him, feeling a surge of contentment as their footsteps matched in their own rhythm. Not only could he redeem himself by helping the Temple, he would work with Qui-Gon again. Even if he were confined to the fringes of the investigation, he'd take what he could get. It was the first step toward reestablishing the trust between them.

Tahl was checking on the status of the search teams when they arrived. She looked up at them, her lovely face worried. Obi-Wan hadn't seen her since Melida/Daan. She'd been ill after her rescue, thin and drawn. Now her extraordinary green-and-gold striped eyes were sightless, but they gleamed against the dark honey tones of her skin.

"Nothing yet," she said by way of greeting. "Who is with you, Qui-Gon?" She paused. "It's Obi-Wan, isn't it?"

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"Yes," Obi-Wan said hesitantly. He was worried about her reaction to his presence. After all, in order to blow up deflection towers for the Young, he'd stolen the transport intended to spirit her off the planet. Would she hold a grudge? But relief flooded him as her face broke into a smile.

"Good. I'm glad." She made a wry face. "You have a knack for rescuing me. It could come in handy. No luck here, I'm afraid."

"I have news," Qui-Gon said crisply. Quickly, he outlined his suspicions about Xanatos.

Obi-Wan could see as Qui-Gon spoke that Tahl was dubious about this supposition. Even as Qui-Gon was finishing, she was slowly shaking her head.

"You're basing much on a leap of logic, my friend," she said.

"It is a fact that Xanatos was known for his technological genius," Qui-Gon argued.

She waved a hand. "As are countless others in the galaxy."

"None as good as a Jedi," Qui-Gon pointed out. "Except one who was a Jedi. We must look into Xanatos' recent whereabouts. There could be a clue there."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, Qui-Gon. But what if you are? If we concentrate on one suspect, we could waste time."

The indicator light over Tahl's door went on, announcing a visitor. At the same time, a muted bell sounded. Impatiently, Tahl stabbed at the door access that was at the keyboard on her desk. The door hissed open.

"Yes, who is it?" she asked brusquely.

Obi-Wan was surprised to see that the visitor was Siri.

"I was told by Miro Daroon that Qui-Gon Jinn would be here," Siri said. "Obi-Wan told me to contact you if I remembered anything strange about Bruck."

"Yes?" Qui-Gon asked kindly. "Anything could help."

Siri took a step into the room. "It could be nothing ... but a few months ago, I had a strange conversation with Bruck. He told me about his father."

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Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon exchanged a startled glance. Those who were chosen by the Jedi gave up their birthright. The Temple became their home. That way, their loyalties could not be divided or exploited in any way. They committed themselves to the larger, deeper connection, the Force. It was highly unusual for a Jedi student to mention - or even think of - a parent, especially at Bruck's age.

"I didn't understand how he knew about his father, or why he was so interested," Siri went on. "I asked him why he felt this new compulsion. The Temple is our home, the Jedi are family. These are the bonds we renew day by day. By now they are the strongest things in our lives. But not only was the mention of his father strange, his attitude was as well." Siri hesitated.

"Yes?" Tahl prompted gently.

"It seemed to me that it wasn't so much that he felt a need for a father, or wanted to contact him in any way. He just wanted to brag about him. Bruck discovered - and I don't know how, because he wouldn't say - that his father had become a powerful person on another planet."

"Which planet?" Tahl asked. "Can you remember?"

"One I never heard of," Siri answered. "Telos."

Tahl stiffened. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon exchanged another glance. Qui-Gon had his proof. Telos was Xanatos' home.

Yet satisfaction did not register on the Jedi's rugged face. Only disquiet.

"Thank you, Siri," Qui-Gon said. "You have been of more help than you know."

"I am glad to hear it." Siri gave Obi-Wan a quick glance, but he couldn't tell if it was a challenge or apology. She left, the door hissing behind her.

"Well, I should know better by now than to doubt you," Tahl said to Qui-Gon. She let out a long breath. "Xanatos."

"No wonder the student records were stolen," Qui-Gon said thoughtfully.

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"Any changes in the status of students' families are recorded in their files. Somehow, Xanatos got to Bruck through his father. He most likely intrigued the boy, planting longings for power in his head, working on Bruck's anger and aggression until he turned him to the dark side. The same thing," Qui-Gon murmured, "that Xanatos' own father had done to him."

"And most likely Xanatos taught Bruck how to conceal the dark side as well," Obi-Wan added. He remembered during his own meeting with Xanatos how Qui-Gon's powerful enemy could manipulate the truth. His silky manner hid a devious purpose. He had placed doubt in Obi-Wan's mind about Qui-Gon.

"True, Obi-Wan." Qui-Gon nodded. "Bruck would have to be practiced at concealment. Because he was a senior student, he was given more freedom. That helped him, too."

"So now we know our intruder," Tahl said.

"I suggest we divide the investigation into two parts," Qui-Gon stated. "Obi-Wan and I must discover where Xanatos and Bruck are hiding."

So he would be included! Obi-Wan felt a surge of quiet satisfaction.

"Tahl, you must find out everything you can about Xanatos and Offworld. It will be tricky - he's very secretive. But your investigative powers are a legend around here. Start working your galactic network."

"There's no need to flatter me," Tahl said dryly. "I can hardly crawl around tunnels with you and Obi-Wan."

Qui-Gon paused. Obi-Wan saw concern suddenly etch his features. He wasn't sure why. Qui-Gon often told him he was not connected enough to the living Force. There was something in the exchange between the two friends that had hurt Tahl, and Qui-Gon had just realized it.

Tahl turned her head, her hand almost knocking over a cup near her elbow. Lightning reflexes caused her to catch it before it fell. Her face flushed deeply.

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Then Obi-Wan realized what Qui-Gon had seen. Tahl had only recently lost her sight. She had once been a brilliant warrior. Now she must feel as though she was being shuttled to the sidelines. But Qui-Gon was right. Tahl could not crawl through ducts and look for physical clues.

He watched as Qui-Gon moved closer to Tahl's desk. "Clues are found in many ways, Tahl," Qui-Gon said quietly. "The right information can save a mission more surely than a battle."

Tahl nodded. Obi-Wan could see the struggle on her face. Qui-Gon's fingers brushed her shoulder in a swift, compassionate touch.

"It will be a challenge," he said. "Whatever clues there are will be well buried. Offworld is made up of a pyramid of false companies, phony titles. Their assets are hidden carefully. No one knows where their headquarters is."

Tahl's eyes gleamed. "No one so far," she said.

Obi-Wan noted her new determination. Qui-Gon had done this. He had not dwelt on her dissatisfaction. He had acknowledged it compassionately, then flung out a challenge to engage her.

I have so much to learn from him, Obi-Wan thought. And it is not only about battles and strategies and the Force. It is about the heart.

The door hissed open. "Sir Tahl! I am back from my errand. Here are the extra data sheets you asked for." TooJay, Tahl's navigation droid, hurried into the room.

Tahl raised her eyebrows to let Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan know that she had created the errand to get TooJay out of her hair. The navigation droid was designed to help Tahl, but often was just a source of great aggravation to a person who preferred to do everything herself.

"I'll leave you to your task," Qui-Gon said. "Obi-Wan and I have work to do."

On their way out of the room, they almost collided with Bant, who was rushing through the open door.

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"I think I know how Bruck and the intruder are navigating through the Temple !" she cried.

Chapter Eight

Bant's silver eyes met each of their glances. "I was thinking about all the different attacks," she said eagerly. "They all took place near water. Think about it - Yoda was attacked in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. The turbolift controls are by the lake. And you could reach the tech center itself through the water purification tanks."

Qui-Gon nodded. "A series of water tunnels links all the systems. I saw it on Miro's diagrams, but I didn't think the tunnels were navigable."

"They are," Bant assured him. "I use them. It's against the rules, I know," she added sheepishly. "But if I'm late for a class, it's so much faster for me to swim than walk."

"The sporting gear," Obi-Wan said suddenly. "The kit must have several breathers."

"Good work, Bant," Tahl said approvingly.

"Excellent deduction." Qui-Gon put his hand on Bant's slender shoulder. She smiled shyly.

Jealousy trickled through Obi-Wan. He fought against it. Jealousy was not an appropriate emotion for a Jedi. Yet he couldn't dampen it, or make it go away. Bant had always trailed after him. She'd worshipped him. Now, in the short time he'd

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been gone, she'd grown up. Her mind was agile and clever, and she wasn't afraid to challenge him.

And Qui-Gon saw how special she was.

Obi-Wan felt a shock as he realized that if Qui-Gon didn't take him back, he most likely would want another Padawan. Was he thinking of Bant?

"Bant, can you show us the tunnel?" Qui-Gon asked. "We'll need a guide."

Bant nodded. "Of course."

"If any trouble crops up, I want you to fade back," Qui-Gon warned. "Don't engage with Xanatos. He is extremely dangerous."

Bant nodded solemnly. Qui-Gon turned to Obi-Wan. "We'll need breathers."

"I brought some," Bant told him. "I thought you'd want to go right away."

"That was quick thinking," Qui-Gon said approvingly.

Obi-Wan trailed after Qui-Gon and Bant. *Now I'm the one who is tagging behind her*, he thought, entering the turbolift with them. They took the lift to the cordoned-off lake area.

"I found the tunnel entrance when I was exploring the bottom of the lake," Bant explained as they waded into the cool water. "Water is flushed through every twenty minutes past the hour, so I always keep track of time. It's easy to get out in time, or there are plenty of places to climb to when the water flushes through."

She dove under the surface. Obi-Wan followed the trail of her bubbles. Bant was so graceful underwater that she soon pulled ahead. When she realized this, she stopped and waited for them.

They wound through a grotto of underwater rocks. A panel was cleverly hidden in the face of a large boulder. Bant accessed the panel and swam through. Qui-Gon followed, and then Obi-Wan.

They surfaced in a large tunnel of blue tile with a ceiling that curved overhead. The water was clear and clean.

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"This services the fountains and reflecting pools in the wing," Bant explained, her voice echoing against the tiled surface. "There are landing platforms every thousand meters or so. Some of them are high enough to conceal someone who wants to hide. I'll stop as we go along."

Qui-Gon nodded. Bant took a breath and dove under the water. They followed.

Obi-Wan followed Bant's waving pink-orange legs through the crystal water. She led them down tunnel after tunnel, curving and twisting throughout the Temple. They stopped at every landing platform to examine it for traces of Xanatos or Bruck. They found nothing.

At last Bant surfaced at a place where a wide main tunnel narrowed and fed into three smaller tunnels.

"This feeds into the water purification tanks," she said as she bobbed. "We've seen everything. I guess I was wrong." Bant looked discouraged. "We should head back."

"It was a good deduction, Bant," Qui-Gon told her kindly. "And we haven't disproved it yet. We didn't find anything. That doesn't mean that Xanatos wasn't here."

Qui-Gon treaded water, surveying the area. "What's that?" he suddenly asked, pointing to a recessed area to one side.

"It's too small to be a landing platform," Bant said. "I think it's a service area for the purification tanks."

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon's powerful stroke toward the recessed area. The Jedi hoisted himself up on a narrow ledge, water streaming down his tunic. Obi-Wan followed, and Bant easily vaulted up behind them.

Qui-Gon worked his way along the ledge. It ran alongside the side tunnel for a time. Then it ended in a sheer wall. From here they could hear the hum of machinery.

"We're close to the purification tanks," Bant said.

"But why would the ledge just end?" Qui-Gon wondered. He bent to examine the curving wall on one side. "Here. There's an access panel," he said. "Bant?"

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Bant eased past Obi-Wan. "I see it," she said excitedly. Her fingers ran alongside the edges. She pressed something, and the curved panel slid open.

Qui-Gon stepped through. When Obi-Wan followed, he saw that they were on some sort of service platform that was suspended above the water in the durasteel purification tank. A narrow, tiled staircase led down to the water below.

Qui-Gon strode to a corner. He bent down to examine a servo-tool kit and some items stacked against the wall.

"They were here," he said.

Obi-Wan felt something that began as a whisper, like a soft breath against the back of his neck. The disturbance in the Force was muffled, and he couldn't quite place it. But Qui-Gon looked up, his keen eyes alert. His gaze met Obi-Wan's.

Yes, his eyes seemed to say, as they had said many times when he was his Master. I feel it, too, Padawan.

Then the muffled disturbance escalated to a roar. Below them the water parted, and a black form rose. It was Xanatos.

Chapter Nine

Xanatos was perfectly still, waist-high in deep water, suspended by the Force without kicking or moving his arms. His wet black hair flowed to his shoulders and his sharp blue eyes, as clear and cold as ice crystals, gleamed in the dim light. Watery shadows sent flickering patterns across his black tunic.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had already activated their lightsabers. They stood waiting.

But Xanatos didn't move to engage them. He smiled.

"It took longer than even I imagined for you to figure out it was me," he called mockingly to Qui-Gon. "That noble head of yours can be so thick. Foolishly, I continue to give you credit for some intelligence."

Qui-Gon stood easily, his lightsaber activated but held loosely at his side. He did not appear to be in attack position, but Obi-Wan knew his fighting style well. If Xanatos were to spring, Qui-Gon had only to shift slightly in order to meet the attack.

Qui-Gon didn't answer Xanatos. His face was a study in composure. He didn't appear to have heard Xanatos at all.

Obi-Wan knew they could not attack while Xanatos remained in the water. If they jumped in after him, their lightsabers would short out if the activated lasers came into contact with water.

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Xanatos knew it, too. Perhaps that was why he taunted Qui-Gon, goading him to attack.

"You don't even answer me?" he called. "Still holding a grudge? What a hard heart you have, Qui-Gon."

"I wasn't aware we were having a conversation," Qui-Gon answered. He moved forward a step. "That was always the way with you, Xanatos - you prefer the sound of your own voice."

Obi-Wan saw a momentary flush on Xanatos' cheeks. Then he laughed. "How tiresome you are, Qui-Gon. Your petty taunts still miss their mark. You never were very clever. And you still rely on children to do your work. You never would have figured out the water tunnels on your own."

Suddenly, he flew through the air in a great leap, propelled by the Force. His black cape streamed water as he activated his lightsaber in the blink of an eye. Obi-Wan was ready, stepping forward even as Xanatos touched down on the platform.

He saw Bant make a running dive off the platform. She was unarmed, and no doubt was swimming for help. She had only waited for Xanatos to move.

Xanatos' red lightsaber crashed against the green glow of Qui-Gon's. The angry buzz echoed through the tunnel. Xanatos had landed to Qui-Gon's left, and Obi-Wan raced to cover the Jedi's flank.

Xanatos was a skilled fighter. His strength was staggering. When Obi-Wan's lightsaber tangled with his, the shock nearly sent him flying backward. It was all he could do to keep his feet. The platform soon grew slick with their wet footprints and the water from their clothes. It was hard for Obi-Wan to keep his footing. Xanatos was as quick as he was strong, already whirling away from Obi-Wan's attacks to strike at Qui-Gon.

Gradually, Obi-Wan became aware that Qui-Gon had succeeded in manipulating Xanatos, getting him close to the narrow stairs. Xanatos took a step down, then another, as Qui-Gon stepped up the fierceness of his attack. Obi-Wan saw the reason for the strategy. If Xanatos got close enough to the tank,

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he would have to swing back to gain momentum for his blows. Xanatos would run the risk of shorting out his lightsaber or weakening his attacks. The strategy could not be obvious, he knew. They had to distract Xanatos with countermoves so that he wouldn't realize how close he was to the water below.

Obi-Wan joined in the attempt, trying to keep Xanatos off-balance while driving him toward the water. The steps were slippery. It was difficult to get enough grounding to lend strength to his blows. He was tiring, but Qui-Gon remained focused, moving gracefully, forcing Xanatos down another step.

As he fought side by side with Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan felt the familiar rhythm pulse between them. The Force was strong, bonding them together as one unit.

Over the sound of the battle, the sizzle of the lightsabers, and his own heavy breathing, Obi-Wan heard a noise. It started as a rumble in the distance. Within seconds, it was a roar.

It was the water flushing the system. A giant tidal wave of foaming water rushed toward them from a conduit in the tank.

"Jump, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon ordered. Using the Force, they made a simultaneous leap onto the platform above.

Immediately, Obi-Wan whirled to face Xanatos, who was no doubt behind them.

But Xanatos had not leaped to safety. Grinning, he deactivated his lightsaber, then jumped off the step just as the torrent roared through. Within the flicker of an eyelash, he was swept away.

"He'll drown," Obi-Wan said, astonished at Xanatos' action.

"No, he won't," Qui-Gon said grimly, his eyes on the white water. "We shall meet him again."

Chapter Ten

The battle had not tired Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan could see that it had only fueled his determination to catch Xanatos and defeat him.

"Let's search the area," Qui-Gon told him. "I have a feeling that Xanatos allowed me to maneuver him down the stairs. It was almost too easy."

"He had planned his escape," Obi-Wan suggested.

"Yes," Qui-Gon agreed. "But with Xanatos, there is always a double motive. He was trying to lead us away from something."

Obi-Wan walked to the opposite edge of the platform. "There's a ladder here," he called.

A slender metal ladder was tucked against the wall. It had been hidden by the platform's edge. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan climbed down. When they were just above the surface of the water, they could hear the sound of falling water ahead.

"It's a spillover," Qui-Gon called back to Obi-Wan. The area ahead was concealed by Qui-Gon's broad back. "And there's a duct here leading to the outside. I think--"

Suddenly, Qui-Gon paused. Holding onto the ladder with one hand, Obi-Wan leaned out to see.

Lashed against the wall was a small air-speeder.

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"We've found his escape route," Qui-Gon said with satisfaction.

"Qui-Gon? Obi-Wan?" Bant's worried voice floated out to them.

"Here!" Qui-Gon shouted, and a second later her face appeared over the platform's edge.

"I brought Jedi security," she said. "Are you all right? Where's Xanatos?"

"He escaped," Obi-Wan told her. "He jumped into the water when the tunnel was flushed."

"Let's go back up," Qui-Gon told them. "Security can remove the airspeeder. At least Xanatos will be trapped inside the Temple."

They climbed the ladder back to the platform, and two members of Jedi security went down to take care of the speeder.

"I was so worried," Bant told them. "I hated to leave you, but I didn't have a lightsaber, and--"

"You did the right thing, Bant," Qui-Gon interrupted kindly. "When instincts are as good as yours, don't question them."

More and more Obi-Wan had to wonder if Qui-Gon was interested in Bant as his next Padawan. It certainly seemed that the Jedi singled her out.

Qui-Gon turned to him. "You fought well, Obi-Wan."

Normally, Obi-Wan would have felt deep satisfaction from Qui-Gon's praise. But now he only wondered if Qui-Gon was merely being nice, preparing him for the day he would be left behind.

Qui-Gon sent Bant back to brief Tahl on what had happened. Obi-Wan wandered off to the edge of the platform where Xanatos had thrown himself into the foaming torrent. He remembered the deep sense of unease he'd felt when Xanatos had risen out of the water, the black form containing a monstrous evil ... He'd been wearing a waterproof satchel on his back, Obi-Wan suddenly recalled. Why?

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What if it had been no accident that Xanatos had appeared at the platform? What if he'd come to remove the evidence that showed he'd been there? What if he'd been tipped off? He certainly had managed to stay one step ahead of the Jedi until now. That wasn't easy.

"I think there could be a spy at the Temple," Obi-Wan said slowly, turning back to Qui-Gon. "Xanatos has someone planted there, warning him of our next move. Why else would he have come here with a satchel on his back?"

"Many reasons, I suppose," Qui-Gon said.

"And remember that he said that you had to rely on children to tell you that he was using the tunnels? How did he know that Bant tipped you off?"

Qui-Gon frowned. "I'm not sure about this, Obi-Wan. The only ones who knew we were searching the water tunnels were Bant and Tahl. They are both completely above suspicion. Bant would never do anything to compromise the security of the Temple."

Stung by how quickly Qui-Gon had leaped to Bant's defense, Obi-Wan blurted, "And what about Tahl? Do you trust her so well?"

"With my life," Qui-Gon answered shortly.

"But you haven't seen her in years," Obi-Wan pointed out. "What if Xanatos got to her somehow?"

"No, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said curtly. "You are wrong. I am used to betrayal. I know exactly what it looks like." He gave Obi-Wan a hard look and turned away.

Obi-Wan felt a stab of pain. He knew Qui-Gon was talking about him.

Chapter Eleven

The moment the words left Qui-Gon's mouth, he regretted them. His harshness had arisen more out of his frustration at Xanatos' escape than anything Obi-Wan had said. Yes, the boy had lost his trust. There was no need to torture him by continually reminding him of it. It was behavior unworthy of a Jedi.

It was his own flaw, Qui-Gon realized heavily. He was the one who could not take the leap to trust again. It was not Obi-Wan's fault. It was a combination of Qui-Gon's history and his nature. Although he felt a connection to other beings, he was slow to trust them. Once his trust was given, it was solid. When it shattered, he was at a loss as to how to refashion it again.

His problem. Not Obi-Wan's.

He needed to tell the boy this. The bond between Master and Padawan had to be one of total trust, and he didn't know if he was capable of giving it, even if Obi-Wan was. It wouldn't be fair to Obi-Wan to take him back under those circumstances. It might be better for Obi-Wan to find a new Master.

I will speak to him. When I am sure what it is I want to say.

Suddenly, the lights in the tunnel dimmed to half-power. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon exchanged a concerned glance. A moment

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later, Qui-Gon's comlink buzzed. Tahl's crisp voice came through the unit. "We have some developments here."

"I noticed. We'll be right there." Qui-Gon turned to Obi-Wan. He spoke gently to the boy to make up for his harsh words. "I don't think Tahl is in league with Xanatos," he said. "But you could be right about the spy. Let's keep it in mind."

Obi-Wan nodded. The boy was silent as they hurriedly made their way to Tahl's quarters.

Tahl sat at her desk, a pile of data sheets on her lap. "I just spoke to Miro," she told them. "He's been trying to fix the air circulation system in the senior students' wing. When he took the necessary steps, all the lights in the Temple went to half-power. Plus, the refrigeration unit in the dining hall failed. He's working on it."

"The lights are powered down on every floor?" Qui-Gon asked.

Tahl nodded. A ghost of a smile flitted across her face. "Now we're almost even, Qui-Gon. We both have to work in the dark."

"Not quite even," Qui-Gon said with a smile that was evident in his voice. "You're still wiser than I am."

Tahl grinned. "Speaking of which, that's not the development I was talking about. I found out something about Offworld. Here, I printed it out for you." She handed the data sheets to Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon stared at the sheets. There were columns of numbers and names of companies. "You're going to have to tell me. You know I'm not good at galactic finance."

"Offworld is not as solvent as they appear," Tahl said, tapping her finger on the desk. "A futile mining operation on an inhospitable planet has drained its resources. Xanatos refused to accept defeat and just kept pouring more and more money into the operation. There's a rumor that he's secretly plundered the treasury on his home planet of Telos."

Qui-Gon stared down at the numbers, which meant nothing to him. The figures weren't important. Tahl's findings were. If

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Xanatos was close to financial ruin, maybe his motive for storming the Temple had as much to do with money as revenge.

Always a double motive ...

"The vertex," he said softly.

"Of course," Tahl breathed.

Obi-Wan looked at them, puzzled.

Qui-Gon thought for a moment. Yoda had told him a secret. But if Obi-Wan was to help them, he had to know. He filled Obi-Wan in on the story of the Jedi agreement to guard the vertex for a short time.

"We've been focusing too much on Xanatos' revenge motive," Qui-Gon said. "Xanatos is more complex than that. Why put himself in such danger if all he got out of it was personal satisfaction? But destroying the Temple *and* walking away with a fortune would be worth much more to him."

"The treasury room is one half level below the Council room," Tahl said. "Isn't it strange how the wings have been shut down one after the other? Now everyone has been moved to the central building. This can't be accidental."

"Xanatos is planning something," Qui-Gon brooded. "He hopes to contain us so that it will be easier to destroy us. But how?"

The door hissed open and TooJay walked in, carrying a tray. "I brought your lunch, Sir Tahl," she announced.

"I'm not hungry."

"There is a protein cake, fruit, and--"

"Just put it down," Tahl ordered absently, her mind still on Xanatos. TooJay set down the tray and began to straighten Tahl's desk. "Whatever he is planning, it will happen soon," Tahl said.

TooJay moved one set of papers from one side of the desk to the other.

Qui-Gon stood. "Tahl, can TooJay fetch Bant? We need to talk to her."

Tahl turned toward Qui-Gon, a surprised expression on her face. "Bant?"

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Qui-Gon spoke in a meaningful tone. "I'll explain when she gets here."

"TooJay, please fetch Bant from the temporary quarters," Tahl ordered.

"I can wait for your lunch tray, sir," TooJay added.

"Now," Tahl said firmly.

"I will return," TooJay said, hurrying out the door.

As soon as the door closed behind the droid, Tahl turned to Qui-Gon. "What was that about?"

"How did you get TooJay?" Qui-Gon asked her.

"I told you, Yoda arranged for it," Tahl answered.

"Did Yoda bring the droid himself?" Qui-Gon persisted.

Tahl nodded. "Why?"

"It was just a few days after you and I arrived from Melida/Daan," Qui-Gon mused. "Was the droid ever out of your sight?"

Tahl groaned. "Are you kidding? TooJay is always underfoot." Then she frowned. "Except on the second day. I needed TooJay to guide me to the north wing. But I couldn't locate her for several hours. She said she had to attend some kind of indoctrination training. What are you driving at, Qui-Gon?"

Tahl looked mystified, but Obi-Wan saw where Qui-Gon was heading. "The droid appeared at the same time that the thefts began," he told her.

"Are you saying that TooJay is the thief?" Tahl asked. "That droid is pretty conspicuous."

"No, TooJay isn't the thief," Qui-Gon said. He glanced at Obi-Wan. "But I think we could have found our spy."

"We'll have to be sure," Obi-Wan said. "If we could shut TooJay down temporarily--"

"We could find the transmitter," Qui-Gon finished. "We can't have Xanatos know we suspect."

Tahl's mind worked quickly, absorbing Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan's leaps of thought. "How can we shut TooJay down without arousing suspicion?"

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Obi-Wan grinned. "That's easy. Just act naturally."

Tahl turned her head toward him. "What do you mean, Obi-Wan?"

"It's obvious that the droid annoys you," Obi-Wan answered. "Pick a fight and shut her down because you've had enough."

Slowly, Tahl smiled. "I've done it before."

"Very smart, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon approved. "Let's do it when she returns."

Within minutes, TooJay reappeared. "I cannot locate Bant. If I can say this, Sir Tahl, I do not think it advisable for me to be absent. You could need my assistance. For example, there are data sheets on the floor several centimeters from your left foot--"

"I know that," Tahl snapped. "Qui-Gon, those are for you. Why don't you sit here?" She stood, sweeping an arm toward a chair. The tray of food TooJay had brought earlier crashed to the floor. Obi-Wan sprang forward to help, but Qui-Gon held him back.

"Your lunch!" TooJay scurried forward. "It was ten centimeters to your right--"

"Enough, you driveling droid!" Tahl snapped. "If you don't shut your voice activator, I'll shut it for you!"

"But you won't be able to navigate!" TooJay protested.

"I'll be able to think!" Tahl shouted. She reached forward and deactivated the droid completely.

Silence fell. Tahl grinned. "Was that natural enough for you, Obi-Wan?"

Qui-Gon strode forward and began to examine TooJay. "Here," he said after a moment. "Right in the joint of the pelvic servomotor. A transmitter."

"Does it record and send simultaneously?" Tahl asked.

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. "I would guess that Xanatos has some sort of trigger on his end that alerts him if the conversation is important. He could have programmed several word triggers, like my name, or Yoda's, his, Bruck's - there could be any number of triggers. That way he doesn't have to listen to everything that

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happens to you - only what he needs." Qui-Gon examined the transmitter. "This unit transmits audio and visuals."

"So Xanatos has known what we were planning all along," Tahl said, sinking back into her chair. "He's been watching our every move. This is bad news."

"Not at all," Qui-Gon said softly. "Now we do not have to chase him. He will come straight to us."

Chapter Twelve

Qui-Gon turned to Obi-Wan. "Obi-Wan, I need you to go to the temporary dormitory. Pick a senior student with your height and build. Then come back here. And be as quick as you can."

Without taking time to respond, Obi-Wan raced out of Tahl's quarters and headed for the lift tube. He reached the level where the students had set up sleeping areas and hastily scanned the crowd. He already knew who he would choose. Not only was his friend Garen Muln his size, but Obi-Wan trusted his abilities as well.

"Obi-Wan! Are you looking for me?" Bant ran forward from a crowd of students who were busy unrolling bedding.

Obi-Wan continued to scan the sea of students. "I'm looking for someone to help Qui-Gon and me," he said.

"But I can help!" Bant's silver eyes shone eagerly. "I'd be glad to help Qui-Gon."

The jealousy that Obi-Wan had tried to smother suddenly leaped inside him. The hurt and longing he'd been feeling turned into something uncontrollable. The open eagerness in Bant's face made him more furious than ever.

"Yes, I'm sure you would," he told Bant savagely. "I'm sure you'd take any opportunity to show Qui-Gon how valuable you are. How much he needs you."

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The light in Bant's eyes dimmed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you want to be Qui-Gon's Padawan," Obi-Wan said fiercely. "It's obvious. You keep trying to impress him. You hang around him all the time."

Bant shook her head. "But I just wanted to help. I'm not trying to be his Padawan. You're his Padawan, Obi-Wan."

"No, I'm not. You made that clear to me. I let him down. So maybe he deserves you, instead."

Bant's eyes filmed over. "That's not so," she whispered.

Obi-Wan caught sight of Garen. He called his name and beckoned him over. "We need your help," he told Garen as his friend came up.

"Obi-Wan--" Bant began.

"I don't have time to talk," Obi-Wan said brusquely.

Bant nodded, her face full of hurt. Quickly, she walked away.

"What did you say to her?" Garen asked him, taking a step toward Bant. "You hurt her feelings."

Obi-Wan grabbed his arm. "You don't have time to go after her now. Qui-Gon needs you."

Obi-Wan led the way out of the dormitory. He felt guilty about his harsh words. Asking for Garen's help in front of Bant was a deliberate snub. Garen's look of disapproval both irritated him and fueled his guilt. His friend was silent as the lift tube hissed upward toward Tahl's quarters.

After this is over, I'll apologize to Bant, Obi-Wan thought. I let my jealousy take over. It was wrong. I'll make it right.

The lights in the hallway outside Tahl's quarters were still at half-power. Obi-Wan saw Qui-Gon standing by Tahl's door, his back to them.

"Qui-Gon, I brought Garen Muhn," he called to him.

The tall man turned, and Obi-Wan saw it was Ali-Alann.

"I apologize," Obi-Wan said. "I thought you were Qui-Gon."

Qui-Gon stepped out from Tahl's open doorway. "That was exactly what you were supposed to think."

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Qui-Gon studied Garen. "You'll do very well," he murmured.

"Qui-Gon, I am happy to help you, but what am I going to be doing?" Ali-Alann asked respectfully.

"Not much," Qui-Gon answered. "You have to be me for a short time, that's all. And Garen, you will pose as Obi-Wan."

Garen nodded. Both he and Ali-Alann had caught Qui-Gon's seriousness.

"Obi-Wan and I will record a voice track," Qui-Gon went on. "You will activate it when you're sure that Tahl's personal navigation droid is nearby. Then you'll go on a search for the intruders. But you will not find them."

"Why not?" Garen asked.

"Because we will," Qui-Gon said, putting a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. His eyes glowed fiercely. "We will put an end to this."

Qui-Gon's hand on his shoulder, his steady words, sent a shiver through Obi-Wan. He had been unfair to Bant. If Qui-Gon was encouraging to her, it was only because of his goodness. It didn't mean Qui-Gon wanted Bant as a Padawan any more than it meant that he still wanted Obi-Wan. It only meant that he was encouraging strength where he saw it. Obi-Wan realized it wasn't Bant who stood between him and Qui-Gon. It was Qui-Gon's own feelings. He had known that. He just didn't want to accept it.

"We'll have to exchange tunics," Qui-Gon said. "Everything they wear and carry must be ours. We can't underestimate Xanatos. The match must be as perfect as possible."

Tahl suddenly came to the door. Her sightless eyes zeroed in on Qui-Gon exactly. Her ability to place people by their voices was exceptional.

"Qui-Gon, we could have a problem," she said. "Bant has disappeared. She knows she's not supposed to roam the Temple without permission."

Garen and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance. They knew why Bant had left without permission.

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Just then, Qui-Gon's comlink signaled. He activated it.

"What a pleasure to greet you again, Qui-Gon."

Everyone froze. The mockery that ran through the deep voice alerted even Ali-Alann and Garen that this was Xanatos.

"What do you want?" Qui-Gon asked tersely.

"My transport," Xanatos answered smoothly. "Fully fueled, on the spaceport landing platform. And no one around to follow me."

"Why should I give you this?" Qui-Gon asked scornfully.

"Hmmm. An interesting question. Perhaps because I have bumped into a friend of yours in the water tunnel. I think it might be a good idea if the fish-girl stays with me for awhile. Unless you object."

It took a moment, no more, for Obi-Wan to realize who Xanatos meant. Bant. He had kidnapped Bant.

Qui-Gon squeezed the comlink so hard that Obi-Wan was surprised it didn't shatter. Tahl grabbed the doorframe. Garen took a step forward, as if he could reach through the comlink and grapple with Xanatos. Only Obi-Wan did not move. His blood had turned to ice, his muscles to stone.

"So do we have a deal?" Xanatos asked. "My transport, and I send the girl back to you. I'll give you fifteen minutes. That is all."

"How do I know you have Bant?" Qui-Gon asked.

Seconds later, a firm, high voice came over the comlink. "Qui-Gon, don't do it. I'm fine. I don't want you to--"

Bant's voice was cut off abruptly. The comlink went dead.

Chapter Thirteen

Qui-Gon went inside Tahl's quarters to confer with her. Ali-Alann and Garen followed. Obi-Wan still found himself unable to move. It was as though his body had taken over, refusing to listen to his mind. No matter how forcefully he told his legs to move, they would not. Never before had this happened, not during battle, not even when Cerasi had been killed in front of his eyes.

The words passed through his mind rapidly, like figures streaming across a data screen.

My fault. My fault. Bant will die. She will die. Xanatos is merciless. She will die. And again it will be my fault.

Bant and Cerasi merged in his mind. His grief was a howl inside his body. It tore at his stomach, his throat, and yet he could not let it loose. The loss of Cerasi rushed through him, as keen as the moment he had seen the life ebb in her crystal green eyes. She was gone to him forever. For the rest of his days, he would think of her, need her, turn to say something to her, decide to contact her... and he would never be able to reach her again.

He loved Bant as he had loved Cerasi. How could he have spoken so harshly to her? How could he have suspected the most loving heart he knew of plotting against him? She would never

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have tried to take his place with Qui-Gon. He knew that as surely as he knew his own name. He had spoken out of bitterness, out of fatigue, out of his own shame, out of everything but truth.

Bant always spoke the truth. What a valuable friend she was.

And he would lose her. He would lose her forever.

My fault.

If Bant died, the grief would destroy him.

He bent over and stared at the floor, his heart racing as though he'd just fought a battle. He gulped down his panic, but he could not make it go away. Instead it rose in his throat again and again, choking him.

He heard footsteps approach him, then pause. He recognized Qui-Gon's step.

No. Don't let him see me this way.

He struggled to compose himself. But the panic was too real. The fear squeezed his throat, cramped his muscles. He could not move.

He saw Qui-Gon's boots stop in front of him. Then, to his surprise, the large man crouched next to him. His voice was close to his ear.

"It is all right, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said gently. "I understand."

Obi-Wan shook his head. Qui-Gon could not possibly understand.

"Never fear your feelings, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "They can guide you if you control them."

"I - I can't." Obi-Wan forced the words out. How he hated to admit his weakness to Qui-Gon! But he could not lie.

"Yes, you can," Qui-Gon said with the same gentleness. "I know you can. You are a Jedi. You will focus. You will reach your calm center. Do not try to tamp down the fear. Do not let it grip you. If you let it move through you, it will leave you. Breathe."

Obi-Wan breathed. A tiny part of the panic loosened its grip. He breathed again, and felt the fear rise. This time he did not

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battle it. He pictured it rising on his breath, leaving his body. His muscles loosened slightly.

"We will rescue Bant," Qui-Gon continued. "We will defeat Xanatos. We will bring him down."

The panic was lessening. But not the shame.

"I hurt her." The words were jerky, forced out on a hiccup of air. "I made her run away."

"Ah." Qui-Gon paused. "Did you send her to Xanatos? Speaking sharply to a friend is wrong, Obi-Wan. It is cause for an apology. But it is not cause to be responsible for what happens afterward. Bant knows that. Her kidnapping is not your fault, and she would be the first to say so. She knows she should not use the water tunnels alone."

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on the floor. He grabbed onto Qui-Gon's calmness like a raft. He strove to find it within himself. He knew that Qui-Gon was frantic to find Bant, was full of anxiety to rid the Temple of Xanatos. Yet Qui-Gon crouched next to him, perfectly willing to wait out his panic.

"You want to return to the Jedi," Qui-Gon continued. "Now *be* a Jedi. This is the moment. This is *exactly* the moment when you must. The very worst time is the time you *must* follow the Code. Cast away your doubt. Let the Force flow through you."

Obi-Wan lifted his head and met Qui-Gon's steady gaze. Now he could feel the Force move between them, gather itself and surround them. He knew that together they could defeat Xanatos. He was able to cast doubt aside and believe.

Qui-Gon saw the change in his face. "Are you ready?"

Obi-Wan nodded.

"Then come." Qui-Gon stood. Obi-Wan found that his legs moved easily. The strange paralysis was gone.

"What are we going to do?" Obi-Wan asked.

"When your enemy strikes unexpectedly, things change," Qui-Gon said. "But if your plan is good, there is no reason to abandon it."

Chapter Fourteen

Tahl sent TooJay on an errand while Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged clothes with Garen and Ali-Alann.

"Your boots are too big," Garen said, clomping around Tahl's quarters.

"No, your boots are too small," Obi-Wan said, wincing.

Qui-Gon and Tahl stood in a corner, speaking softly to Miro Daroon on the comlink. Their voices blended, interrupted, spoke rapidly and crisply as they conferred on strategy, deciding what Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan would say on the voice track.

When Tahl and Qui-Gon signed off, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon went over what they would say several times. They would need to have the rhythm of natural conversation, Qui-Gon drilled into Obi-Wan. It was perfectly all right to hesitate or interrupt. But the information had to be exact.

The conversation had to be recorded in the hallway. The noise level and ambient sound had to mimic the area where TooJay would overhear. Ali-Alann and Garen stood at opposite ends of the hallway, making sure no one would pass. They also served as lookouts for TooJay.

While these preparations were made, Obi-Wan felt a constant tightening inside himself. Thanks to Qui-Gon, he had driven out his fear. Now his task was to find his center. He was impatient to

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engage Bruck and Xanatos. Yet impatience was not an ally in battle. It was an enemy. Qui-Gon had drilled that into him many times. He tried to draw on Qui-Gon's composure. The Jedi Knight seemed perfectly unhurried, yet Obi-Wan saw how quickly and surely he moved and spoke. In barely any time at all, everyone was clear on what had to be done and everyone was in position.

Qui-Gon activated the voice track. "We must talk, Obi-Wan. We must move fast. No doubt Xanatos has moved Bant from the water tunnels. We'll begin the search in the north wing of the Temple. Did you get the infrared sensors?"

"I have them here," Obi-Wan replied. "Where will the other search teams be?"

"They'll start at the high floor of the north wing while we begin at the lowest. We'll meet in the middle and then shut down the wing completely and move onto the south wing. We'll trap them eventually."

"I don't know why we have to leave Xanatos' transport on the landing platform," Obi-Wan protested. "Why should we give him what he wants?"

"Because he might be checking to be sure that we do. We can't endanger Bant. Patience, Obi-Wan. Xanatos will never reach the transport."

"I can't help it," Obi-Wan said fiercely, making his voice rise. "I want to fight them!"

Qui-Gon had directed Obi-Wan to seem impatient. He wanted Xanatos to think the boy was close to the edge of his control. It could give them an advantage in the coming battle if Xanatos underestimated Obi-Wan.

"You must have control," Qui-Gon said sternly. "Now, as we search, remember that Miro will be shutting down the power system. We can't run the risk of other systems failing while we search. Miro will have to shut down the system in order to run a program to find all the bugs."

"Will we lose power completely?" Obi-Wan asked.

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"Yes. Miro will have to shut down water systems, communications, power stations, and last of all, security. The turnoff will last for twelve minutes. Then Miro will turn the system back on, beginning with security. It's a necessary risk. Now come. Let's head for the north wing." Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan walked off toward the lift tube. As soon as they turned the corner, Qui-Gon deactivated the voice track.

He handed it to Ali-Alann and Garen. In a few moments, Tahl would summon TooJay. Ali-Alann and Garen would impersonate Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan and transmit the conversation while TooJay was within earshot. This would give Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon time to position themselves to ambush Xanatos.

Qui-Gon was counting on the fact that Xanatos would be monitoring closely, since he would want to know if his demand would be met. Thanks to the transmitted conversation, he would think he had a clear field.

"You two must seem to follow through on the plan," Qui-Gon directed Ali-Alann and Garen. "Start searching the north wing. Try to stay in ill-lighted areas, just in case Xanatos or Bruck checks to make sure."

Ali-Alann and Garen nodded.

"And what am I to do, Qui-Gon?" Tahl asked softly.

"Your work is done, my friend," Qui-Gon said. "Now it is up to me and Obi-Wan."

"May the Force be with you," Tahl murmured.

"May it be with us all," Qui-Gon quietly replied. He signaled to Obi-Wan, and they headed for the lift tube.

"Where are we going?" Obi-Wan asked.

"To Xanatos' ultimate destination," Qui-Gon answered. "Everything he's done has led to this. Capturing Bant was a bonus - he can now use her as leverage to get his transport back. He knew Miro would eventually have to shut down the entire power core, including the security system. In those precious minutes when security is down, Xanatos is planning to strike."

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Of course! "He's going after the vertex in the security chamber," Obi-Wan said.

"And we will be waiting," Qui-Gon replied grimly.

Chapter Fifteen

The security chamber was built like a strongbox. It could not be reached by turbolift, only by a short stairway down from the Jedi Council room itself. Access was limited to Jedi Council members, who underwent a retinal scan to enter. Approval had to be received and coded into the central system.

Ali-Alann and Garen's impersonation had given them time to arrange the ambush. Yoda arranged for Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan to enter before security shut down. The hallway outside the chamber was narrow and dark, the lights at half-power.

"Three minutes until Miro shuts down the power," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan softly. "Xanatos and Bruck will come through one of the air ducts. Do not wait to engage them. Surprise is key. But don't activate your lightsaber too early or the glow will alert them that someone is here."

Obi-Wan nodded. He gripped his lightsaber, keeping his eyes on the ceiling above. The minutes slid by slowly. The unventilated air caused him to perspire. His fingers slipped on the lightsaber hilt. Quickly, he wiped his palm on his tunic.

He tried to summon up Qui-Gon's calm, but it slipped by him. He did not know why he was having such trouble with his composure. Every nerve was on fire. All he could think of was Bant. Was she alive or dead?

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The thought of Bant sent panic shooting through him again. Obi-Wan bit down against it. They would save Bant. They would defeat Xanatos. Their enemy was not invincible. He trusted Qui-Gon's strength and cleverness.

Suddenly, the lights went out. Even though Obi-Wan knew this would happen when Miro shut down the central power core, it still made him start. He wrenched his mind to stillness.

A slight noise overhead alerted him that someone was now traveling in the duct system. Qui-Gon kept his eyes trained on the duct closest to the treasury door.

Moments later, the grate slid open. Xanatos and Bruck somersaulted through, both dressed in black, blending into the darkness. The only gleam of light was of Bruck's white ponytail and Xanatos' pale skin.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon moved as one. They sprang forward, lightsabers activated. The surprise on Xanatos' face was gratifying. He gave a strangled cry of rage and sprang back, his hand reaching for his lightsaber.

Bruck was not as quick. He stumbled back, fumbling. The hilt of his lightsaber was in his hand when Qui-Gon, with a delicate touch, knocked it away without touching Bruck's skin. He did not want to harm the boy, just capture him.

Obi-Wan sprang toward Xanatos as Qui-Gon came at him on the other side. But this time Xanatos surprised them. Instead of trying to elude them, he leaped forward and grabbed Bruck. He held his glowing red lightsaber against the boy's neck.

"Don't come any closer," he said, his eyes snapping a challenge. "You know I'll do it, Qui-Gon."

"Xanatos?" Bruck's eyes wobbled in fear.

"Be quiet," Xanatos snapped. "Now I have two hostages, Qui-Gon," he continued. "Do you want to sacrifice two young lives?"

Qui-Gon made a subtle movement toward Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan felt the Force surge. Qui-Gon was reaching out to him, trying to tell him something. But what?

If your plan is good, there is no reason to abandon it.

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Obi-Wan remembered that Qui-Gon had wanted him to seem impatient, close to the edge of control. Xanatos would not look at him as a threat.

"You're not going to let him get away with this, are you?" Obi-Wan shouted, pumping desperation in his voice. "I don't care about Bruck! Let's charge him!"

"The boy is ruthless, Qui-Gon," Xanatos purred. "Did he learn this from you?"

With a cry, Obi-Wan started toward Xanatos. At the same time, Qui-Gon sprang forward. Xanatos gave Bruck a violent shove away from him, trying to use the boy to block Obi-Wan's advance. At the same time, he stepped forward to meet Qui-Gon's first strike.

Bruck dropped to the floor and scrambled for his lightsaber. Obi-Wan leaped to prevent it, but Bruck grasped it, rolled away, and sprang to his feet.

"Make sure she is dead!" Xanatos hissed at Bruck. "Now!"

Bruck took off toward the end of the hallway.

"After him!" Qui-Gon roared to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan raced to catch up to Bruck, but Xanatos stepped to the side and made a diving sweep at him. Obi-Wan parried the violent blow, but it drove him backward. He slashed at Xanatos, but Xanatos blocked his every move while twisting to evade Qui-Gon's attack.

Grimly, Qui-Gon stepped up his pace, going after Xanatos again and again, so relentlessly that Obi-Wan was free to maneuver.

He didn't want to leave Qui-Gon alone with Xanatos. But he had to stop Bruck. It was an impossible choice, but he had to make it. Leaving Qui-Gon behind, Obi-Wan took off to save Bant.

Chapter Sixteen

Qui-Gon felt the dark surge of Xanatos' anger charge the air. He did not meet it with his own. Once he had hated Xanatos, but he could not exist with hate and continue to be a Jedi. He did not hate his enemy. He wished to stop him. There was a difference. He knew Xanatos wanted him to use hate and anger. Xanatos wanted more than anything to prove that Qui-Gon Jinn could violate the Jedi Code. That would be his victory.

Qui-Gon found his core of purpose and stillness even as he vaulted, somersaulted, came at Xanatos from one approach, then another. His will collided with that of his former apprentice.

Xanatos flipped backward twice, then changed hands and came at Qui-Gon from a different angle. This was a new skill. Now Xanatos fought with two hands. Qui-Gon would have to be alert for a sudden change in attack. He parried Xanatos' blow with a backhanded sweep, then whirled to jab an uppercut toward the chin. Xanatos stepped back, anticipating the move. But Qui-Gon was already reversing. His next blow missed Xanatos by a hair. He saw the displeasure in his eyes.

Xanatos turned and ran. Qui-Gon gave pursuit, running swiftly up the staircase and bursting into the Jedi Council room.

The Force warned him to duck, and he rolled away to his left. A small table smashed into the wall behind him, propelled by the

Jude Watson

Force. Qui-Gon ducked as a viewscreen followed, smashing as it hit the wall behind his head. He sprang forward, descending on Xanatos with a lightning-fast series of lunges.

"Your age is slowing you down, Qui-Gon," Xanatos panted. "Five years ago you would have dispatched me inside the security chamber. Now I am faster than you."

"No," Qui-Gon said as their lightsabers clashed. "You just talk more."

He circled Xanatos, looking for an opening. Xanatos kept moving, keeping the Council chairs between them. Using the Force, Xanatos caused one to slide away and smash against the wall. Then he pounced.

Their battle assumed a new ferocity. Again and again their lightsabers tangled as each tried to gain the advantage.

"Give up, Qui-Gon," Xanatos growled. "I will outlast you. I will kill you here, then steal the vertex. Your precious Jedi will have to go on without you."

Qui-Gon blocked a sweeping blow. "Your small mistakes have always been your downfall."

"I... don't... make ... mistakes." Xanatos grunted out the words as he took an involuntary step backward under the fury of Qui-Gon's assault.

"Your footwork betrays you," Qui-Gon answered, pressing his advantage with a slashing blow. "You don't realize how you let me know your next move. Notice how your body is leaning just slightly. You're placing more weight on the ball of your left foot. You're going to move left."

Xanatos shifted his balance, and Qui-Gon, already anticipating his reaction, drove forward. Xanatos nearly dropped his lightsaber as he slammed against the wall.

Ready to push his advantage, Qui-Gon leaped after him. But Xanatos switched hands again, parrying Qui-Gon's blow as he leaped across the room. He landed on a table close to the window. Gripping his lightsaber, he cut a hole in the window that overlooked the tall towers of Coruscant.

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The window peeled back. Keeping his eyes on Qui-Gon, Xanatos smiled.

"You will never defeat me, Qui-Gon Jinn. That is your curse." Then he leaped out into thin air.

Chapter Seventeen

Since the turbolifts weren't operational, Obi-Wan had to race behind Bruck down hallways and stairs. The sound of Bruck's heavy footsteps alerted him to the boy's direction. Bruck had never been light on his feet.

Soon, Obi-Wan guessed where Bruck was heading - the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Where better to hide Bant than underwater?

He ducked into the room. Immediately, he spotted Bruck running along one of the trails that twisted through the greenery. Obi-Wan ran as silently as he could, hoping to surprise Bruck from behind. But an instant before Obi-Wan reached him, Bruck stepped off the path and reversed direction. He had learned cunning from Xanatos.

The Force warned Obi-Wan of the attack a split second before, or he would have run into the end of Bruck's lightsaber. Bruck came at him with a two-handed sweep.

Obi-Wan had time for a flashpoint of unreality, as though he were in a dream. His old adversary advanced, a light of anger and rivalry in his eyes. Everything was so familiar - Bruck's aggressive stance, his small, angry eyes, the way his fingers gripped the hilt of the lightsaber.

But this isn't training. It's real. He wants to kill me.

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Obi-Wan deflected the blow and whirled to take the offensive. But Bruck had gained in strength as well as strategy. He blocked Obi-Wan's blow and struck again.

"I've learned well, haven't I?" he asked, his pale blue eyes fierce. "Xanatos showed me what true power is. The Jedi will regret that they held me back!"

"They never held you back," Obi-Wan said, parrying Bruck's strike. He stayed on the defensive, waiting to turn into the aggressor. If he kept Bruck talking, perhaps he could spot Bant. While he parried and struck, his eyes darted around, searching for a glimpse of her under the still surfaces of the pools that surrounded him. "No one chose me as Padawan!" Bruck cried, grunting as he swung a brutal blow toward Obi-Wan's legs.

Obi-Wan danced backward. "Then you were not ready."

"I was ready!" Bruck screamed. Then his expression grew crafty. "More ready than you, Obi-Wan. You're the one who disgraced the order."

Obi-Wan knew that Bruck was trying to get him to lose his temper. But the words still hit their mark. His next blow had anger behind it. He saw Bruck's satisfied smile.

Yes, Bruck had learned well from Xanatos.

"I was always better than you," Bruck taunted him. "Now I am even stronger."

But Obi-Wan knew that he, too, was stronger. Thanks to Qui-Gon he was a smarter fighter, cooler, with better strategy.

As long as I don't give in to my anger.

Obi-Wan remembered how Qui-Gon had pointed out that in the battle on the platform, Xanatos had subtly kept them away from what he was trying to conceal: the airspeeder. Now Obi-Wan wondered if the apprentice had learned from the Master: was Bruck pushing him back slowly in order to keep him away from seeing Bant?

With a great leap, Obi-Wan suddenly launched an offensive. His furious blows sent Bruck backward, and he kept up the assault, driving him down the path. Sweat poured from his body

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as he swung the lightsaber in a ceaseless motion, attacking Bruck from all sides.

The highest waterfall loomed ahead. Normally the cascading water flowed into a deep pool, but since Miro had turned off all systems, the waterfall was dry.

But the pool was not. Obi-Wan felt his heart stop as he glimpsed a flash of a lighter blue underneath the deep sapphire of the water. Bant's tunic! His fear threatened to choke him, but he willed it to calm. He drove Bruck before him relentlessly until they reached the edge of the pool.

Bant lay on the bottom. Her ankle was securely chained to a heavy anchor. Obi-Wan felt relief course through him as tiny bubbles rose to the surface of the water. She was still alive.

Bant could last underwater for long periods of time, but she needed oxygen to breathe. How long had she been under?

"She doesn't look too good, does she?" Bruck remarked as he took advantage of Obi-Wan's distraction to administer a two-handed blow toward his midsection.

Obi-Wan raised his lightsaber and deflected the blow. As he staggered from the impact, he screamed Bant's name, calling on the Force to help him reach her.

Her eyelids opened slowly. She blinked. But she seemed to barely register his presence. Her eyes closed again.

Hold on, Bant!

But Obi-Wan did not feel an answer. Her living Force was ebbing. He could feel it. Bant would die.

"That's right, Obi-Wan," Bruck taunted him. "Bant is dying. I won't have to do a thing. I'll just make you watch it. We would have freed her if we got the treasure. But another person will die because of you. Right in front of your eyes. Just like your friend Cerasi. I overheard the other Jedi talk about how you failed *her*."

At the sound of Cerasi's name, something shattered inside Obi-Wan. The composure he'd fought for was gone now. He attacked Bruck in a fury, not caring about strategy or finesse.

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Startled, Bruck backed up the hill that formed the waterfall. It was a rocky slope, the footing treacherous. Ruthlessly, Obi-Wan pressed Bruck, driving him up, keeping him off-balance. Their lightsabers tangled.

Obi-Wan's arm muscles ached as he swung with all his might with each stroke.

He felt clumsy in Garen's too-small boots.

Bruck reached the top of the hill. He took the opportunity to plant his feet and swing down at Obi-Wan, aiming for his chest. Obi-Wan twisted as he parried the blow. His foot slipped on the mossy rocks and he landed on one knee. Pain sliced through him, followed by fear. If he lost this battle, Bant would die.

Still on one knee, Obi-Wan managed to deflect Bruck's thrusts. But he had allowed anger to pierce his heart - deadly for such an intense battle.

The muscle weakness he had felt outside Tahl's quarters returned. He could barely keep the lightsaber moving in order to counteract Bruck's blows. He tried to use the Force again, but it proved as slippery as the moss-covered rocks.

"Good move, *Oaff*-Wan," Bruck sneered.

Bruck had given him that nickname when they were students in the Temple, making fun of his growing legs and his occasional misstep during training.

At the memory of Bruck's cruelty, a sudden passion for vengeance rose in Obi-Wan. Bruck's cruelty had once been petty. Now it was dangerous. Xanatos had made Bruck a killer.

Boiling anger blurred his vision. He hated Bruck as he had hated no living creature. Anger drove out the Force completely, leaving him in a vacuum that he filled with his rage. The rage united with his fear and panic and created a dark cloud that threatened to overtake him completely.

Bruck saw the change in his eyes. His own pale blue eyes flashed with cruel satisfaction. He planted both hands on the hilt of the lightsaber and raised it high.

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In that split second, Obi-Wan saw the seeds of his own defeat.

This is the moment. The very worst time is the time you must follow the Code.

Cast away your doubt, Padawan. Let the Force enter you.

Obi-Wan raised his saber. He let his anger and fear move through him, exhaling them in a breath. He reached inside and found his center of calm.

Bruck's lightsaber came down, and he blocked it. But his diversion had cost him. He struggled to the lip of the hill and gained it just as Bruck's next blow fell. Obi-Wan parried the strike, but did not have the balance to counterattack. It didn't matter. He had regained his calm. He could regain his footing. He knew now that he could defeat Bruck.

But Bruck was equally certain of victory. Obi-Wan's fall and his unsteady footwork had convinced him that the battle was his. Bruck's flaw had always been overconfidence when he thought he was on the verge of winning....

Obi-Wan circled around Bruck, forming a new strategy. He bounded from a rock and flipped over Bruck so that he was behind him. He just needed a moment to check his chrono so that Bruck would not notice.

Miro was shutting down the system for twelve minutes. He had about eleven seconds until Miro began powering up the different systems, one by one. First, security. Then the water systems would resume.

Obi-Wan moved forward, pushing Bruck back toward the dry bed of the waterfall. He made sure to continue to block Bruck's blows and retaliate, but weakened his stroke slightly. He still wanted Bruck overconfident.

"Getting tired, Oafy-Wan? Don't worry. It won't be long before I finish you off."

Out of the corner of his eye, Obi-Wan saw the red security light beam on the service console. The water would be next.

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Bruck's ponytail whipped around as he whirled, attacking Obi-Wan from the left. Instead of blocking the blow, Obi-Wan stepped aside so that Bruck's momentum would send him into the dry waterfall bed.

He heard a distant roar. If Bruck heard it, he did not understand its significance. His entire being was focused on his anger and his lust for victory.

The water gushed from the hidden pipes and spilled out in a torrent. Obi-Wan had timed his counterattack, and Bruck found himself surrounded by water. He was barely able to keep his footing, but he swung his lightsaber back to aim another blow at Obi-Wan ...

And hit the water with the laser. With a fizzing sound, the saber shorted out.

"That's it, Bruck," Obi-Wan said. "Give up."

"Never!" Bruck yelled fiercely, hate still in his eyes. Bruck's face contorted in a frenzy of frustrated rage. He leaned down to pick up a weapon to throw at Obi-Wan, any of the rocks that lined the bed. But the water pulled at him, and he slipped on the mossy rocks. He lost his footing and stumbled back to the very edge of the waterfall. He teetered on the edge for an instant, his eyes wide with disbelief and panic.

In one fluid motion, Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber and leaped forward. He reached out a hand, ready to pull Bruck to safety. But it was too late. Bruck's panic sent his arms windmilling, further unsettling his balance. Obi-Wan felt Bruck's fingertips brush his as his opponent tumbled backward into thin air.

Obi-Wan stepped forward and grimaced as he saw Bruck's body hit a rock and bounce, then hit another. He landed on the dry grass beside the waterfall. His head lay at an awkward angle, and he was still.

Obi-Wan gathered the Force to him and dove off the top of the falls. He landed clear of the rocks, and pushed himself

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upward through the cool water. He swam quickly to the bank and vaulted out onto the grass. He felt for Bruck's vital signs.

Bruck was dead. Obi-Wan guessed that he had died instantly. His neck was broken.

He did not have time to wonder how he felt about that. There was Bant to save. Obi-Wan felt in the interior pocket of Bruck's tunic, hoping to find a key to unlock Bant's chains. Surely Xanatos had given Bruck the means to free Bant as well as let her die.

His fingers closed around a small durasteel square with holes drilled into it. It had to be the key.

Taking a deep breath, he dove into the pool. He swam down toward Bant. He grabbed the chain and fitted the durasteel square into the lock. The chain fell free. Obi-Wan scooped up Bant and hugged her to his chest. She felt as insubstantial as a handful of snow.

He exploded above the water, gulping air, and swam to the bank. He waded out and carefully lay Bant on the grass.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Breathe," he urged.

She took a ragged breath, then another. Color began to return to her cheeks.

Obi-Wan laid his head against the top of hers. He kept his arm around her. His warm tears mingled with the cold moisture on her skin.

"I'm so sorry," he told her. "I'm so sorry. This was my fault."

Bant coughed. "Don't," she said.

Don't what? Hold her?

"No ... need," she forced out.

Things were not resolved between them. There was so much he needed to say. But he could not leave Qui-Gon to fight Xanatos alone any longer.

"I have to help Qui-Gon," he said. "Will you be all right?"

Bant's breathing was easier, and her nod was strong. "I'm fine. Go. You're his Padawan. He needs you."

Chapter Eighteen

Qui-Gon moved fast. He leaped out the broken window after Xanatos. He knew the same thing Xanatos did - that outside, a narrow ledge ran underneath the windows.

He used the Force to propel his leap and guide him to the ledge. Xanatos was already moving away from him. Qui-Gon guessed he was heading around to the south, where the landing platform was, fifteen stories below.

Qui-Gon could see the spires and towers of Coruscant. Airspeeders and air transports buzzed above and below him. An air taxi sailed by. One of its passengers looked out, then did a double take when he saw the two men on the ledge hundreds of kilometers in the air.

The wind was powerful up there, rising in gusts that were strong enough to make Qui-Gon stagger. He hung onto the sill above his head until a gust passed, then pressed on. Xanatos was moving quickly, but Qui-Gon knew he could catch up to him.

Xanatos looked back and grinned. The wind whipped his black hair, and his blazing blue eyes looked deranged. The wind was dying down. Qui-Gon moved quickly, almost running. He caught up to Xanatos before they were above the landing platform. He could not let Xanatos move much farther in that direction.

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Qui-Gon activated his lightsaber and attacked. This was the moment. This was his stand. He would kill Xanatos here. Not from anger. From the certainty that this evil had to be stopped.

They fought with concentrated ferocity, each blow designed to cause the other to stagger and fall. Balance was tricky on the narrow ledge. Wide blows could only come from one side. Follow-through was difficult. Still Qui-Gon adapted his style to fit the area. He used short jabs, sometimes falling on one knee to come at Xanatos from below. He felt the Force swirl around him, strong and sure, aiding his instincts, telling him where Xanatos would move next and how. He blocked each blow and came back stronger. He sensed that Xanatos was on the edge of desperation, though his former apprentice would never let him see it.

"Haven't you forgotten something, Qui-Gon?" Xanatos called to him over the screaming wind. "The last part of that takeover equation. Devastation."

"You must be tiring, Xanatos," Qui-Gon said. "That's when you begin your taunts." He gritted his teeth as he slammed a blow toward Xanatos' shoulder.

Xanatos blocked it. "Your precious Temple is doomed!" he shouted. "When that idiot Miro Daroon powers up the last link in the system, the whole fusion furnace will blow. The Temple will implode. Did you really think I'd allow the Jedi to follow me?"

Qui-Gon staggered both from surprise and an unexpected short strike from Xanatos' left. *Was he telling the truth?* Desperately, Qui-Gon realized there was no way for him to know.

He attacked furiously, delivering a wide arm sweep from the left. The two lightsabers tangled. For an instant, their faces were very close. Xanatos' eyes burned with a strange light. The pale half-circle scar on his cheek gleamed.

"What you revere can destroy you." His voice was soft, yet Qui-Gon caught every word. "Haven't you learned that yet?"

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Above him, Qui-Gon saw the lights of the Council room flicker. After the lights, Miro would power up the communications system. Then the repulsorlift engines for the turbolifts throughout the complex. The air circulation would be last.

Qui-Gon calculated that he had only three minutes before the explosion. Maybe four. If Xanatos was telling the truth . . .

"You can't be sure, can you, Qui-Gon?" Xanatos sneered. "Will you allow your precious Padawan to die just to kill me? He tried to get away from you once. Why don't you get rid of him for good?"

Qui-Gon hesitated, his lightsaber held in attack position. He knew he could defeat Xanatos. But how long would it take?

In that split second, Xanatos glanced below. An air taxi flew twenty meters underneath the ledge. Qui-Gon sprang forward, but Xanatos stepped off the ledge. He landed on the air taxi. Qui-Gon saw the surprised driver's look of panic as Xanatos calmly lifted him out of the seat and pushed him out into midair.

Qui-Gon had less than a second to decide. He could make the jump. He could land on the taxi. He could grapple with Xanatos. He could end this once and for all. The second passed. Xanatos roared away. Helpless rage surged in Qui-Gon even as he deactivated his lightsaber and raced for the opening in the window.

Qui-Gon jumped inside and ran, accessing his comlink as he moved. He tried to reach Miro, but the communication fields weren't fully functioning. He was halfway to the turbolift before he realized that it wouldn't be operating. Qui-Gon's frustration was turning to panic. How could he reach the tech center in time?

Suddenly, Obi-Wan burst into the hallway from the stairs.

"He's rigged the Temple to implode," Qui-Gon told him. "We have to get to the tech center."

Obi-Wan was already moving. "Follow me."

Chapter Nineteen

As they raced down the hall, Qui-Gon asked tersely, "Bant?"

"She's fine," Obi-Wan said shortly. "Bruck is dead."

A pall had settled over Obi-Wan's face. He would need to talk about this later, Qui-Gon knew.

"I studied the diagrams," Obi-Wan told him, changing the subject as they turned the corner. "I can get us there faster through the infrastructure of the building."

Obi-Wan leaped and kicked open a duct overhead. Qui-Gon noticed that he was barefoot. "Garen's boots slowed me down," he explained as he swung himself in. Qui-Gon followed. They crawled down a short length of an air circulation shaft and came to a service panel. Obi-Wan accessed it. It slid open and he climbed in. It was a tight fit, but Qui-Gon made it. Here he could stand upright. They were on a catwalk, surrounded by machinery.

Qui-Gon heard a slow whining noise. "The repulsorlift engines are starting up," he said.

"This way." Obi-Wan ran down the catwalk. He came to a vertical ladder and began to scramble down. Quickly, Qui-Gon followed.

The ladder left them at a service door. Obi-Wan pushed through. They were now ten levels down.

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"There's a back stairway to the right," Obi-Wan said as he raced down the hallway with Qui-Gon beside him. "It will bring us to the horizontal tube that is used to transport food from the dining hall to the med unit."

They came to the tube. Obi-Wan gestured for Qui-Gon to go inside. Qui-Gon crammed himself into the small space. Obi-Wan squeezed in next to him. Then he hurriedly set the controls. In seconds, they were sucked down the tube on a moving ramp. At the end, Obi-Wan kicked open the door.

They spilled out in one of the resting rooms in the med unit. Qui-Gon knew it was on the same level as the tech center. But he also knew that a shaft separated the two wings.

Qui-Gon checked his chrono. "We have about one minute," he told Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan's face was streaked with sweat. "The gas duct." He turned and ran.

Qui-Gon followed. Out the window he could see that across the shaft ran an air-systems duct. "Where does it come out?"

"Right where we want it to," Obi-Wan said, locking his fingers in the grate and prying it off. He kicked it aside and scrambled inside the duct. "It's the gas transport system for the freezer containers used to store med supplies."

Qui-Gon squeezed into the opening. The duct wasn't high enough for him to stand. He followed closely behind Obi-Wan as they crawled rapidly down the tunnel.

"Obi-Wan, what happens if Miro tests the gas transport system when he powers up the air ducts?" Qui-Gon asked.

There was a pause. "I'm not sure," Obi-Wan answered.

Qui-Gon knew that the gas pumped into molten carbonite was toxic, but decided to keep the information to himself. He didn't need to tell Obi-Wan. The boy had caught the implication and scrambled even faster down the tunnel.

Thirty seconds. Qui-Gon tried to move fluidly, gracefully. He was a big man, and wasn't normally fast on his hands and knees in a confined space. He felt the Force surrounding Obi-Wan in

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front of him, and it seemed to vibrate around them in the enclosed space, giving them strength and agility.

Qui-Gon saw a fractured beam of light ahead. They were approaching the grate.

Obi-Wan blasted through the opening so fast he seemed just a streak to Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon swung himself out. Miro was standing at the console, his fingers flying on the keys.

"Stop!" Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon yelled together.

"Don't activate the air circulation system," Qui-Gon warned. "It's booby-trapped."

It didn't seem possible that Miro's translucent skin could pale. But for a moment he seemed to shimmer like a ghost. He jerked his hand back from the console.

"We have to find the bug," Qui-Gon said, striding toward the console.

Miro punched in a code, and the blue screen that surrounded them filled with numbers and graphs. "I ran a complete bug check when the system was powered down," he said. "Nothing came up. There's no program in the system anymore except for mine. Are you sure about this, Qui-Gon?"

"No," Qui-Gon said reluctantly. "Xanatos could have lied. But can we take the chance?"

"I can run the checks again," Miro said, tapping on the keys. "Maybe I missed something."

Obi-Wan stared up at the blue screen, trying to read the schematics of the system. Qui-Gon turned away. He knew that Miro was vastly better at figuring out tech systems. But he could do something that Miro could not. He could go inside the mind of Xanatos.

Qui-Gon closed his eyes, remembering the final scene with Xanatos on the ledge. His enemy's fatal flaw was his need to boast. Often he inadvertently let slip something that would alert Qui-Gon to the diabolical windings of his mind.

And Xanatos prided himself on his elegance. Whatever he had done, it would have a twist. Qui-Gon remembered the fiendish

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glee in Xanatos' expression. Yes, there was something personal about what he had done, some final, stinging slap to the Jedi.

What you revere can destroy you....

Qui-Gon's eyes sprang open. "Miro, where is the main power source of the system?" he barked.

"In the power core," Miro answered. He crossed the room and opened a durasteel door marked fusion furnace. "Here."

Qui-Gon hurried through the door. He found himself in a small circular room. A catwalk ran around a deep central core. A ladder led down into it.

"This is the fusion reactor. The power sources are lined up in a grid," Miro explained. "It goes down about ten stories. I'm running my second checkup on the power sources now, but nothing came up the first time--"

"No," Qui-Gon murmured. "It wouldn't."

He hoisted himself onto the ladder and began to climb down. "Whatever you do, don't reboot the system," he called up to Miro.

It didn't take him long to reach the bottom of the core. Qui-Gon circled around slowly, running his hands along the various compartments and dials. He saw a compartment labeled fusion furnace access.

Qui-Gon pressed the lever. The door slid open. Nestled inside were the stolen Healing Crystals of Fire.

He tucked the glowing artifacts reverently in his tunic. Immediately, they warmed his skin.

He climbed up the ladder where Miro and Obi-Wan were waiting anxiously. He pulled the crystals out of his tunic. "They were in the fusion furnace," he told Miro.

"They would have served as a massive power source," Miro said, his voice slightly unsteady. He cleared his throat. "They would have started a chain reaction with the burst of energy from the reboot. If I had punched that key--"

"What we revere would have destroyed us," Qui-Gon finished.

Chapter Twenty

The Temple returned to normal faster than anyone thought possible. Systems were up and running, students moved back to their quarters, new food shipments arrived, and classes resumed.

Obi-Wan felt out of step. He did not feel normal again. He still remembered the brush of Bruck's fingers against his. Time and again he stared down at his hand and opened and closed his fist, remembering how he had grabbed air instead of Bruck. Bruck had tried to kill his friend. Obi-Wan was glad that he had stopped him. But he had been responsible for another person's death, and he could not forget it.

Obi-Wan only had one mission now: to talk to Bant.

She had been checked out at the med unit and pronounced in perfect health. The only thing she would need was rest, so she was given a day off from classes.

Obi-Wan searched for her everywhere. At last he found her at the place he least expected - the waterfall. She sat on a rock overlooking the pool where she'd almost died. Bant always sat as close as possible to the pool, so that the fine spray misted her skin.

"Why are you here?" he asked gently, taking a seat beside her.

"This is one of my favorite spots at the Temple," Bant answered, her silver eyes on the cascading water. "I did not want

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what happened here to spoil that. I almost died here. Someone else did lose his life. The experience taught me more about being a Jedi than a thousand classes." She turned to Obi-Wan. "I hope you don't blame yourself for Bruck's death."

"I know I tried my best to save him," Obi-Wan said. "But my heart is still heavy."

"That is how it should be," Bant said. "A life is lost. When he still had life, he had a chance to change."

"Bant, I am so sorry for--" Obi-Wan began in a rush.

"Don't," Bant interrupted softly. "There's no need to apologize. You saved my life, you know."

"There is a need," Obi-Wan said firmly. "There is a great need." He stared down at his hands in his lap. "I spoke out of anger and jealousy. What I felt mattered to me more than your feelings."

"You were worried about your future," Bant said. "You are afraid of losing Qui-Gon."

Obi-Wan sighed. He stared out at the sapphire pool. "I thought I could return to the Temple and everything would be as it was. The Council would excuse me and welcome me back. Qui-Gon would come around. But I am the one to come around. I see now that what I did cannot be fixed so easily. It may never be fixed. I see what I've done to myself, to the Master-Padawan relationship. This is why a Jedi waits so long and is so careful about choosing a Padawan. So much trust is involved. I ask myself, if Qui-Gon had rejected me, set me loose after I pledged my life to his, how would I feel? Yes, I would forgive him, but could I join him again? Could I deliver all my trust to him again?" He met Bant's eyes, feeling desolation well inside him. "I don't know the answer," he finished. "How can I expect Qui-Gon to know?"

"I think you could trust him again," Bant said slowly. "And I think Qui-Gon will do the same. All of this just happened. You haven't had time to sit down and think, let alone talk to each other. You've been through so much. There are things that

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happened on Melida/Daan you won't tell me." She paused delicately. "When you are ready, I would like to hear them."

Obi-Wan took a shuddering breath. He could not say her name aloud. But somehow he knew he must. He knew that if this moment passed, he might never speak of her again to a living soul, and something in him would die.

"Her name was Cerasi," he said. He felt a great tide of sorrow rise in him. But he also felt a release by saying her name. "Cerasi," he said again. He lifted his face and felt the cooling spray. Suddenly, he felt stronger, as though Cerasi's vibrant spirit stood by him and touched his shoulder. "We had a connection that I can't explain. It wasn't the result of time, of hours spent together. It wasn't the result of secrets or confidences. It was something else."

"You loved her," Bant said.

Obi-Wan swallowed. "Yes. She inspired me. We fought together side by side. We trusted each other. And when she died, I blamed myself. When I thought that you might die, I knew I could not go on if it happened."

"But you would have, Obi-Wan," Bant said softly. "We all go on." She leaned against him, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "You saved my life. We will go on together."

Qui-Gon sat in Tahl's quarters. They had been silent for some time. TooJay had been sent for reprogramming. For once, Qui-Gon would have welcomed her musical chatter.

"You are to meet the Council soon," Tahl said at last. "If you decide to take Obi-Wan back as your Padawan, it will help him. The Council would most likely allow him to come back."

"I know," Qui-Gon said.

"Especially considering all he has done," Tahl added.

"I am well aware of all he has done."

Tahl sighed. "You are a stubborn man, Qui-Gon."

"No," Qui-Gon protested. "Not stubborn. Cautious. I must be sure, Tahl. What if taking Obi-Wan back is not fair to the boy,

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or to the Jedi? If I cannot give Obi-Wan my trust, our Master-Padawan bond will eventually break."

"And you feel you cannot rebuild that trust?" Tahl asked.

Qui-Gon looked down at his hands in his lap. "It is my flaw, I know."

Another silence stretched between them. Then Tahl picked up her cup and ran her fingers around the smooth surface. She held it up to the light she could not see.

"This is a beautiful cup," she said. "I know this even though I can't see it. I can feel it."

It was beautiful, Qui-Gon saw. The material was so thin it was almost translucent, the color a blue so pale it was almost white. The shape was simple, with no handle or curved rim.

"I use it even though I may break it," she said. She placed it down carefully. "Have you ever heard of the planet Aurea?"

"Of course," Qui-Gon said. "Aurea is noted for its fine artisans."

"They have the best glass workers in the galaxy there," Tahl went on. "Many have wondered why this world has advanced the art so much. Is it the golden sands, the temperature of the fires, the long tradition? Whatever it may be, they make the most beautiful vessels in the galaxy, so highly prized that they are priceless objects. But occasionally, someone is careless, or an accident occurs, and one is broken."

Tahl picked up her cup again. "Just like I could break this cup. But these artisans have a greater art than the fashioning of the vessels. They remake the shattered ones. And in that remaking they find their highest art. They take the pieces of something beautiful that has been smashed and create something even more beautiful. You see the seams of the break, but the piece is still flawless. Because it had once been broken, it becomes more valuable than before."

Tahl placed the blue cup before Qui-Gon. The Jedi sat in silence, absorbing the lesson. Could it be, he wondered slowly,

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that the process of rebuilding his trust with Obi-Wan would not be painful, but satisfying?

He picked up the delicate cup. It almost disappeared in his large hand. His fingers closed around the fragile shape, yet the cup did not break. He could not make again what he'd had. But what if the new thing he made was stronger than before, because it had once been broken?

Chapter Twenty-One

Qui-Gon stood before the Jedi Council with Obi-Wan by his side. They had finished their debriefing on the episode with Xanatos.

Obi-Wan noted Qui-Gon's frown with dismay. He sensed the roiling unrest in his former Master. Obi-Wan himself had reason to feel satisfied. The Council had also delivered news to him. Obi-Wan had humbly asked not to be taken back, but to be given probation. It had been granted. He would be required to remain on Temple grounds and have sessions with various Council members. He had not received what he had wanted, but he had received what he felt was right.

But Qui-Gon had not. The Council had opposed Qui-Gon's wish to pursue Xanatos.

"I do not understand your hesitation," Qui-Gon said. "Xanatos is a powerful enemy of the Jedi."

"Enemy of yours, I think he is," Yoda said, his gray-blue eyes intent on Qui-Gon. "Fruitless, a search may be. Wasted energy, it is. And too much anger I sense in you, Qui-Gon. Xanatos will reappear. Meet him you shall. But seek it you shall not."

"We do not forbid you," Mace Windu said. "But know that if you do, you go without our support."

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Qui-Gon did not react. He bowed stiffly and turned on his heel. Obi-Wan followed him from the room.

They stood in the hallway together. Obi-Wan saw that Qui-Gon was struggling to contain his emotions. He knew the Jedi Knight was bitterly disappointed.

"You have told me many times that Yoda always turns out to be right," Obi-Wan tried cautiously. "Even when it doesn't seem so."

"Not this time," Qui-Gon said grimly. "I am going after him, Obi-Wan."

Surprised, Obi-Wan fell silent. He knew how much Qui-Gon respected the wishes of the Council. To oppose them must be a wrenching decision.

Then he pictured Qui-Gon alone, hunting his enemy, and an essential truth pierced him. The picture was wrong. There was a piece missing. Even if Qui-Gon couldn't see it, Obi-Wan could.

Obi-Wan's hand fell on the hilt of his lightsaber. He took a deep breath. He did not need to pause to weigh all the implications of what he was about to say. He knew it was right.

"Then I am coming with you," he said.

Book Eight
The Day of Reckoning

Chapter One

The sleek spaceliner *Leviathan* was jammed with passengers. Every stateroom was full. The lounges and seating areas swirled with color and noise as people from many worlds conversed, ate, argued, laughed, and played games of chance to pass the time.

Obi-Wan Kenobi sat and observed it all. As a Jedi on missions to other worlds, he sometimes got a glimpse of lavish surroundings, but this was his first trip on a luxury spaceliner. He longed to explore the many amusements on board — the game room, the interactive hologram suite, the eating areas with their array of foods and sweets. There was no reason he could not. His companion and former Jedi Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, had told him to feel free to explore. But Obi-Wan did not want to leave his side.

Next to him, Qui-Gon seemed not to notice his surroundings. The Jedi Knight had picked a corner seat in the spacious lounge. His chair faced outward toward the throng. It was a position the Jedi often chose, for it allowed observation without interaction. But Qui-Gon Jinn only made obligatory sweeps of the crowd in order to ascertain potential danger or disturbance before returning his attention to the data-pad in his lap. He spent his time studying the information about the mission ahead that Jedi

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Knight Tahl had managed to gather back at the Temple on Coruscant.

Their mission was unofficial. Against the wishes of the Jedi Council, they were heading to the home planet of Xanatos, the enemy who had tried to destroy the Jedi Temple.

Qui-Gon was still brooding about the escape of Xanatos, Obi-Wan knew. Anger was not an appropriate emotion for a Jedi, but Obi-Wan sensed Qui-Gon's taut frustration. He had faced Xanatos in battle, and had been forced to let his opponent escape in order to save the Temple.

Obi-Wan knew that moment still haunted Qui-Gon. He had come close to stopping Xanatos. It made him even more determined to bring him to justice now. Qui-Gon felt strongly that Xanatos was a grave threat to the galaxy while on the loose.

Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon took this mission personally. Xanatos had once been Qui-Gon's Jedi apprentice, just as Obi-Wan had.

And we both betrayed him, Obi-Wan thought.

His offense, he knew, was not even close to what Xanatos had done. The dark side preyed on Xanatos. He lusted after power and wealth. His every decision moved him closer to the heart of evil.

Obi-Wan had betrayed Qui-Gon by abandoning him. He had decided to leave the Jedi order to stay to help a planet regain peace. He had come to regret the decision. The Council had agreed that he could rejoin the Jedi, but he was now on probation. Obi-Wan could regain what he had, but he could not seem to regain Qui-Gon's trust. Something essential between them had been violated. Now they were just feeling their way along. On this mission, Obi-Wan hoped to show Qui-Gon that they could restore the bond they had started to form.

The Council had not forbidden him to accompany Qui-Gon—they allowed him to go. Still, his decision had not pleased them. They already had a problem with what they saw as his

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impulsive decision to leave the Jedi. This latest decision hadn't changed their opinion.

Obi-Wan had to admit that he was relieved to be temporarily out from under the Council's scrutiny as well as the Temple itself. In the final battle, a Jedi student had fallen to his death in front of him. Obi-Wan had not been responsible. Why did the death continue to haunt him? When he had taken off from the Temple grounds, a heaviness had seemed to lift from his heart.

Qui-Gon had considered many ways to enter the planet without detection, but finally decided the simplest way was best. They would arrive among a throng, as tourists.

Telos was a rich planet with many natural beauties. It had a thriving tourist trade and business interests with other planets in the galaxy. Transports were always crowded.

The many travelers made it easy for the Jedi to disappear. They wore nondescript brown cloaks over their tunics and kept their lightsabers hidden. Although Qui-Gon was a powerfully built man with noble features, he was also capable of dimming his presence and folding into a crowd. Obi-Wan followed his example. They were not recognizable as Jedi, and no one paid the slightest attention to them. Obi-Wan settled back into the plush upholstery and watched as a group of Duros walked by, all speaking in Basic.

"This is my third trip," one of them said. "You're going to love Katharsis."

"They won't let outsiders into the final round," the other said. "That's where you can really score."

Obi-Wan wondered what Katharsis was. Some kind of game? He missed the other's reply, for Qui-Gon had looked up from his datapad at last.

"I think the weak link is UniFy," he said.

"We'll start there."

Obi-Wan nodded. UniFy was a Telosian company that the Jedi Master Tahl suspected was a front for Offworld, the huge

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mining corporation that spanned the galaxy. Xanatos headed the company. No one knew where the headquarters were.

Qui-Gon's brows came together in a frown as he gazed at Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan had no idea what he was thinking. Was he worrying about the mission ahead, or was he regretting Obi-Wan's presence?

They had lost the connection they had once had. There had been fitful starts and shaky periods in their Master-Padawan relationship from the beginning. Still, there had been many times when Obi-Wan knew what Qui-Gon would ask before he asked it. And Qui-Gon often knew ex-actly what Obi-Wan was feeling without his having to say a word.

Now Obi-Wan felt a void.

He would be able to feel connected to Qui-

Gon again, he told himself. It would just take time. Back at the Temple, the last expression of good-bye from his friend Bant had been one simple word: *patience*.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon hadn't had time to resolve anything. They hadn't had time to argue, or replay their decisions. The flurry of departure had consumed them. There had been informa-tion to gather, supplies to pack, and good-byes to be said.

The spaceliner drew closer to the towers of Thani, the capital city of Telos. It flew into a landing bay and docked with the gentlest of bumps. The public-address system announced that arrival procedures were now underway.

They stood and gathered their packs, then joined the stream of passengers heading for the exit.

Qui-Gon leaned in to speak to Obi-Wan softly. "No doubt he will be hard to find," he said. "He knows that I will pursue him. We will have to flush him out."

The announcement system informed them in a pleasant tone that there would be a slight delay in disembarking. Identification would be checked by security police on Telos. Everyone would have to be cleared before leaving the ship.

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Passengers began to grumble. Why were se-curity procedures suddenly so stringent? This would take time. They were anxious to reach their destinations.

"I hear they're checking for some escaped criminals," someone said near Obi-Wan's elbow. "Bad luck for all of us."

Through the crowd, Obi-Wan glimpsed the security police herding the passengers into or-derly lines. Qui-Gon frowned.

"I wanted to slip in unobserved," he said. "If they discover we are Jedi, it could tip off Xanatos. Tahl said he has bribed many officials here."

With a slight movement of his head, Qui-Gon signaled to Obi-Wan. It was time for them to find their own exit.

Chapter Two

"Where are we going?" Obi-Wan asked as they moved fluidly through the pressing throng.

"When a big spaceliner docks, the kitchens have to receive new shipments of food," Qui-Gon remarked. "When you want to leave someplace unobserved, pick the busiest spot."

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon down several levels to the service area. Qui-Gon always explored any large transport soon after boarding. He knew where the tech and service levels were as well as all exits from the spaceliner. "Remember, Obi-Wan," he had said, "if you are heading to a dangerous mission, the danger can begin before you are ready for it. Be pre-pared."

The scent of roasting meat and baking bread filled Obi-Wan's nostrils as they passed the kitchens. His stomach rumbled. Why was it that even during a hasty escape, he could still feel hungry? He was glad when the smells dissipated as they slipped into the storage areas.

Qui-Gon hurried past shelves and bins full of food until he came to the door that led to the loading bay. He glanced through the window to make sure there were no security personnel before accessing the door. It hissed open, and they stepped out onto the loading bay.

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Workers were busily unloading supplies onto small gravsleds. A large hauler stood outside the ship, its port bay door yawning open.

"Grab a container," Qui-Gon instructed as he bent down to hoist a box marked dried fruit.

Obi-Wan picked up a bin at his feet marked soli grains. He let out an *oof* as he hoisted it to his shoulder. Why couldn't he have picked something light, as Qui-Gon had?

Quickly Qui-Gon strode toward the hauler. No one seemed to notice that they were carrying items out of the ship, not in. One of Qui-Gon's many lessons to Obi-Wan had been that if you looked busy in an unfamiliar environment, you were often ignored.

They made it to the hauler without anyone giving them a glance. Obi-Wan put down his heavy bin with relief near the stacks of cartons and boxes. From here they could see the busy port station. Passengers who had been cleared were milling around, bargaining for local transportation. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan strolled toward them.

"You there! Stop!" The harsh command came from behind them.

"Don't turn," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan in a soft voice. "Act as though you don't know who they're talking to."

"Stop!" The sound of running feet came from behind them.

Obi-Wan saw a split second of indecision on Qui-Gon's part. They had done nothing wrong. There was no reason to run. Yet they would have to give explanations Qui-Gon was not willing to give.

Qui-Gon made the decision in his usual swift fashion. "Run," he said crisply.

Obi-Wan had been expecting the command. He shot forward with Qui-Gon. The two Jedi moved as lightly as a breeze, slipping in and out of the crowd without jostling an elbow or bumping a shoulder. Only a whisper of air might disturb a cloak or a tendril of hair as they shot by.

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They reached the entrance to the terminal and joined the stream of strollers on the city streets. Immediately Qui-Gon slowed his pace in order to melt into the crowd. Obi-Wan followed suit, carefully controlling his breathing. He admired Qui-Gon's ability to switch from a full-tilt run to a casual pace without missing a beat. To any observer, Qui-Gon appeared to be a casual walker on the city streets.

The streets were even more crowded than the terminal. "No doubt they'll give up," Qui-Gon said to Obi-Wan, nodding and smiling as though he were remarking on the weather. "It's a tedious job tracking a couple of stray travelers through the city streets."

With his heartbeat and nerves returning to normal, Obi-Wan was now able to observe his surroundings. The city of Thani was bustling. Landspeeders clogged the wide boulevard. Buildings hundreds of meters high rose on either side. Their different facades flashed silver and bronze in the bright sunlight. Crowded between the tall, impressive buildings were smaller structures. Blinking readout signs advertised loans at low rates, or credits advanced against goods. Disorderly lines snaked out from these buildings, the people jostling to get in-side. Obi-Wan passed a large billboard that read: wealth beyond imagining is just one bet away: KATHARSIS

"Katharsis," he repeated. "I heard that name on the spaceliner."

"I've never heard of it. Thani has changed since I was here last," Qui-Gon mused. "Of course it was almost ten years ago. It seems bigger, noisier. And something else is different about it now...."

Obi-Wan suddenly caught a flicker of movement behind him. He glanced at the shiny facade of the next building. Two navy-suited security police officers were swiftly making their way forward, attracting little attention on the busy street. There was no doubt in Obi-Wan's mind that they were heading for them.

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"Qui-Gon —" he started, but Qui-Gon had already seen them.

"They are more determined than I thought," he said, picking up his pace. "Go left."

Obi-Wan wheeled to his left down a narrow alley. They moved quickly now, running down the alley, using the Force to leap over a pile of abandoned crates, and turning sharply right into another alley.

Blaster fire pinged behind them. They heard the sound of exploding crates peppering the wall.

"They mean business," Qui-Gon said. "We'd better go up."

The security police were still out of sight, but they'd round the corner in a few seconds. Qui-Gon reached for the liquid-cable launcher on his belt. He activated the device, and the dual-strand cord shot upward and hooked around the lip of a rooftop overhead. Obi-Wan activated his own liquid-cable. They held on and let the device carry them up to the rooftop, leaping up and landing on their feet. Quickly, they re-traced the cords.

Qui-Gon watched as the security police ran down the alley. They ran past the rooftop, turned a corner, and disappeared.

"That's a relief," Obi-Wan said.

But Qui-Gon did not move. A few seconds later, the security police returned. One of them took out a pair of electrobinoculars and began sweeping the rooftops.

"They're not giving up, I'm afraid," Qui-Gon remarked mildly.

The two Jedi moved backward quickly on their hands and knees until they were out of range. Then they jumped from the opposite side of the roof down to the pavement. They ran down a short stretch of the alley and spilled out into the crowded street again.

"We'll never lose them this way," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan craned his neck and looked over the heads of the surging crowd. "Everyone is heading toward that dome," he said to Qui-Gon. "Maybe we can lose them inside."

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They joined the crowd, weaving through it in order to make it to the entrance quickly. A giant sign flashed in letters a hundred meters high: KATHARSIS.

"I guess we're about to find out what it is," Obi-Wan said curiously.

There were several entrances, and Qui-Gon joined the line at the most crowded. The stream of people pushed through an opening that was big enough to fly a starfighter through.

NEED CREDITS? STOP HERE! The signs flashed around a row of booths near the entrance. Farther on Obi-Wan saw food stalls. Tempting aromas floated toward them. His stomach rumbled again. He almost groaned. With Qui-Gon, he never knew when his next meal would come. His former Jedi Master seemed to exist on a diet of fresh air and determination.

"This must be some sort of gambling event," Qui-Gon said. "Curious."

"And popular," Obi-Wan added, jostled by the surging crowd.

As they entered the interior of the dome, they found themselves high above the central area, which was one giant ring with a smaller concentric ring inside. Large screens were hung at various heights and distances around the dome so that they were visible throughout the giant space. Scenes of natural beauty flashed across them while booming music played out of hidden speakers.

Floating boxes surrounded the central wings. Stationary seating ringed the area, the topmost rows lost in the vastness of the dome.

They climbed up, searching for two empty seats near exits. Qui-Gon's keen gaze swept the crowd below them, looking for the security police who had been following them.

At last he found places a few seats in from the end. They sat, and Obi-Wan turned his attention to the giant screens, which began to flash a stream of names and numbers he could not

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decipher. There was also a screen with a keypad built into his armrest.

While Qui-Gon kept his eyes on the crowd, Obi-Wan leaned over to a tall Telosian seated next to him.

"This is my first time here," he said. "Can you explain what's going on?"

"The screens are flashing the current odds for the games," his seatmate replied, pointing. "You can bet at your seat on each event. There are twenty contestants competing in a variety of contests."

"Last week Rolo was maimed," his companion said dolefully. "I bet twenty thousand cred-its on him."

The Telosian's clothes were threadbare. He hardly looked like a rich citizen. Obi-Wan was shocked. How could he afford to bet so much?

"Today my money is on Tamor," the second Telosian continued.

"You can place larger bets as the day goes on," the first Telosian explained. "Then for the last contest we all drop out and the lottery bettors get to play."

"The lottery bettors?" Obi-Wan asked.

He nodded. "Every citizen is entered in a lottery each week. Three are chosen. They're the only ones who can bet on the last contest. The pot is enormous."

"You're set for life if you win," his companion said, his eyes glowing. "Last week no one won, so it's bigger than ever."

"The lottery is free," the first Telosian explained. "Every native Telosian is entered auto-matically by the government. It's a great thing for Telos."

Really? Obi-Wan wondered, looking around at the crowd. Now he understood the ferocious energy he felt pulsing through the crowd, uniting it. It was greed.

"It seems as though the entire city is here," Obi-Wan remarked.

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The two Telosians nodded. "The city empties into the dome on Katharsis Day. And others come from all over the planet."

"There are Katharsis domes in other parts of Telos, of course," the second Telosian said. "But this is the biggest," he added proudly.

"It's beginning! I have to place my bet." The first Telosian swiveled to face the center of the dome. His avid eyes searched the contestants.

The crowd began to roar as the competitors took their places in the ring below. They lined up and bowed to the crowd.

Obi-Wan felt Qui-Gon stiffen slightly. The Jedi Knight's eyes were directed several levels down. Obi-Wan followed his gaze. The same security officers were walking up and down the rows, their eyes constantly moving.

"Telosian security must be commended," Qui-Gon remarked as he stood. "They certainly are thorough."

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon as they eased their way past the bettors in the row. When they reached the aisle they picked up their pace, climbing steadily past the next section, and the next. Behind them, the security officers continued to climb, their eyes sweeping the crowd.

"We'll have to circle around down to an exit level," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan over the roar of applause.

Obi-Wan scanned the area ahead for the blue-lighted exit signs. He saw one ahead and pointed it out to Qui-Gon. But when they reached it, they saw that it had been blocked off. If the door opened, an alarm would sound.

Qui-Gon turned back the way they had come, but the security police were now cruising the rows next to them. Any moment they would spot the Jedi.

"I don't know if they're pursuing us, or look-ing for those escaped criminals," Qui-Gon said, frowning. "I guess we're going to have to find out. I'll use the Force to bluff our way through."

At that moment, one of the security officers looked over the heads of the crowd and spotted them. He nudged his companion

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and they started toward the Jedi, moving swiftly and quietly so as not to attract attention.

Suddenly, a friendly voice came from behind them. "You two need some seats? I've got plenty of room in my box."

They looked over. A young man sat in one of the luxury floating boxes. It was still anchored to the side. His dark eyes beamed at them in a friendly way and his sandy hair was rumpled as though he passed his hands through it frequently.

"Care to join me?" he asked.

"Thank you. We'd be honored to accept," Qui-Gon responded, stepping into the box. Without seeming to hurry, he motioned for Obi-Wan to do the same.

Obi-Wan eased into the box with the same swiftness. Their new companion pressed a lever, and the box suddenly detached from the floor and zoomed out into the center of the dome. "Thank you *again*," Qui-Gon said politely. "It was hard for us to find a place to sit."

"Sure." Their rescuer gave them a shrewd look. "Especially when you're being chased by security police. If you think you're safe with me, you're crazy."

Chapter Three

The young man burst out laughing before they could respond. "Joke!" he cried. "If you ask me, the security police don't have enough to do. We don't have much of a crime problem here on Telos, so they run after you if you toss away a muja pit. Even innocent folks like me get stopped all the time. I ask you, do I look like a bad guy?" He shrugged and pointed to his chest, smiling.

"No," Obi-Wan said politely, even though he had learned in his limited experience that evil came in many forms.

Their companion laughed again and turned to Qui-Gon. "Your companion lies well. That's a good skill."

"He did not lie," Qui-Gon answered. "You don't appear to be bad, it's true. But neither do you appear to be good. Our acquaintance is too short to make such a judgment."

Their rescuer looked from Qui-Gon to Obi-Wan, a delighted grin on his face. "Whoa, did I hit the jackpot. What a couple of smart guys. Do you know how to bet against the odds?"

"No," Qui-Gon said with a smile. "We're too smart for that."

This time, their rescuer roared with laughter. "Joke! Do I know how to pick friends, I ask you? By the way, my name is Denetrus. You can call me Den."

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"Pleased to meet you," Qui-Gon responded. "I am Qui-Gon Jinn and this is Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Tourists?"

"We're here on business," Qui-Gon answered.

"Lots of business here on Telos," Den said. "I'm a tech worker, so I've been fired from the best of them." He flashed them a cheerful grin.

"Have you ever worked for UniFy?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Sure, who hasn't? They're the biggest employer on Telos. They hire contract workers all the time. Is that why you're here?"

"No," Qui-Gon said carefully. "We just have a meeting there."

Den nodded. "They're a powerful company." He waved his arm to indicate the giant screens around them that flashed images of the global parks and natural beauties of Telos. "UniFy is restoring our natural parks. Most of the proceeds from Katharsis are used for maintaining and preserving the land. The government set it up when the people protested our high taxes. Now we pay hardly any taxes at all. Katharsis saved us from that. Not to mention that it makes us all rich beyond our dreams."

"But only if you win," Qui-Gon pointed out.

"Oh, but all of us here plan to win," Den said, lifting an ironic eyebrow. "Take me. I'm sure this is my lucky day."

They turned toward the smaller center ring of the dome, where a platform was rising up through the floor into the air, creating a dais. A tall white-haired man stood on it, raising his arms to the crowd.

"That's the treasurer of Telos, Vox Chun," Den told them over the roar of the crowd.

A chill passed through Obi-Wan, and he exchanged a quick glance with Qui-Gon. Vox Chun was the father of the student who had fought with Obi-Wan and plunged to his death. Bruck Chun had been a Jedi student who had fallen under the influence of Xanatos. Obi-Wan had battled him, trying to save his friend Bant. Bruck had lost his balance and fallen. Obi-Wan had reached for him and grabbed empty air. The fall had broken

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Bruck's neck. Obi-Wan closed his eyes, remembering the shock of that moment. When he opened them, Qui-Gon was looking at him with compassion.

"The games can't begin without some big-head getting up and droning on about his own accomplishments," Den continued. "It's a good time to take a nap."

Quickly, Obi-Wan returned his attention to the present. He did not mean to forget the past, but he could not let it distract him. "Welcome, Telosians and friends from the galaxy!" Vox Chun shouted. A roar answered him. He waited it out, smiling, then held up a hand. "Thanks to each one of you, the natural beauties of our beloved Telos are being preserved!"

Another roar erupted, this one more deafening than the last. Music swelled from the speakers, and a message flashed against a stunning picture of steam eruptions along a glittering blue shore: katharsis protects our sacred spaces.

"If there is no winner today, at the next Katharsis the grand lottery prize will be the largest ever awarded on Telos!" Chun continued. He waited out the cheers and held up a hand. "In honor of this event, the first citizen of Telos will present the prize. Our great good friend, our most beloved benefactor, the most trusted man on Telos — Xanatos!"

Qui-Gon gave a start as the dome erupted in loud cheers. Den watched it all, his lips curving in the ironic smile he seemed to wear at all times. Spotlights played over the dome and then centered on a front floating box. A tall man stood and waved.

It was Xanatos.

Qui-Gon watched in disbelief as the crowd stamped its feet and thundered, "XANATOS, XANATOS!" over and over.

Qui-Gon had thought he'd prepared for any twist, any sudden reversal. He had not prepared for this. Xanatos was not in hiding. He didn't need to be. It was obvious that he was loved by the people of Telos.

But why? Qui-Gon wondered. Xanatos had been a traitor. Less than ten years before, he had conspired with his father to

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drain the planet's treasury. He had schemed to involve Telos in a needless, destructive war with a neighboring planet. The people must have been manipulated or lied to, for how could they ignore how he had schemed to plunge them into war?

He felt Obi-Wan stir by his side. The boy was just as shocked as he was. He admired how Obi-Wan kept his voice steady and his expression only mildly curious as he turned to Den.

"Who is this Xanatos?" he asked.

"Our most beloved benefactor," Den mimicked, then shrugged. "He's done a lot for Telos."

"I think I've heard of his father, Crion," Qui-Gon remarked casually. "Wasn't he governor of Telos once?"

Den nodded. "He was involved in a scandal. His enemies claimed he was trying to start a war with a neighboring planet in order to enrich himself. But Xanatos investigated and proved it wasn't true. Most Telosians consider both of them heroes."

Den turned back to the central ring as Vox Chun entered a floating box and the first contest began. The contestants ringed the interior space of the dome. All of them rode swoops.

"The first game is called Obstacle," Den explained. "Holograms of obstacles are hurtled at the swoops in an escalating pattern. The object is to avoid them — and the other contestants. It takes superior flying skills. Do you want to place a bet?"

Qui-Gon shook his head. "I think we'll just watch for today, Den."

"Just like I said before," Den muttered, already placing his bet. "You guys are smart."

Qui-Gon was startled at the ferocity of the contests. The crowd seemed happiest when the contestants were in great danger. When two swoops collided, a dark energy swirled inside the giant dome. When one contestant was carried out on a stretcher, the crowd screamed in delight. It was a disturbing event.

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Telos had been a peaceful planet, renowned for its innovative tech industry and its interest in culture and the arts. Qui-Gon wondered what had happened. Had Katharsis changed them, or had their years of prosperity dulled their senses and made them long for more bloodthirsty, pulse-pounding pleasures?

Den seemed unmoved by the commotion around him. He carried a small datapad and entered numbers, constantly watching the odds. Qui-Gon could see he was a serious gambler, yet he placed very small bets.

At last a break was called. The third round of the contest consisted of a vibroblade duel as the contestants were strung from tension cords. The vibroblades did not cut but carried a small electrical charge. The duel had been a free-for-all. Three more contestants had dropped out. One had been seriously injured. The remaining group looked exhausted and drained. Yet after the break they would have to undergo another grueling set of contests.

"Hungry? We can head to the food stalls," Den said, activating the floating box to return to the stadium platform.

"Thank you, but I think we'll move on," Qui-Gon said politely. "We must tend to our business. Can you direct us to UniFy?"

"You can't miss it — just keep heading down the main boulevard. It's on your left. Good luck," Den told them.

They bowed and joined the sea of beings heading for the food stalls in the middle tier of the dome. The security police were nowhere in sight. Qui-Gon hoped they'd given up at last. As the crowd surged toward the tempting food, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan headed toward the blue-lighted exit.

As they passed by the vast arching struts that held up the dome, Qui-Gon felt a sudden surge in the dark side of the Force. Alarmed, he stopped and faded back into the shadow of a thick durasteel strut. Obi-Wan had felt the surge as well and moved with him.

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Qui-Gon gave his surroundings a sweeping glance. He knew what he was looking for.

A black shape detached from a shadowy passageway entrance. Xanatos strode across the empty space, the deep blue lining of his dark cape swirling around him, his black hair flowing to his shoulders. Suddenly, he stopped.

As a former Jedi, Xanatos was also Force-sensitive. He had stopped so abruptly that Qui-Gon had no doubt that he had felt the presence of the two Jedi. But would he interpret what he felt to mean that Qui-Gon was near?

Xanatos stood in the harsh overhead light. The scar that formed a half-circle on his cheek stood out, whiter than his pale, translucent skin. He surveyed the crowd a few meters away as they surged toward the food stalls. His gaze moved slowly over each form. Then he stopped and turned. His eyes swept the empty space, the arching struts, the corridors leading out in all directions.

Qui-Gon did not move. He did not even breathe. Obi-Wan was trying to be just as still beside him. Not with the flicker of an eyelash would they disturb the deep shadows.

Xanatos did not see them. But a slow smile spread over his face.

Qui-Gon knew what the smile meant. Xanatos knew they were here.

The battle had begun.

Chapter Four

Chuckling, Xanatos swiveled and strode back into the central dome.

"He knows we're here," Obi-Wan said quietly.

"Yes," Qui-Gon agreed. "Let's find UniFy. We must move as quickly as we can."

They left the dome and started down the main boulevard. The streets were strangely deserted. Qui-Gon imagined that most of the population was in the Katharsis Dome. Did they suspend work during Katharsis days?

He and Obi-Wan passed a large, impressive building with blue-veined stone columns in front. A silver plaque read the Xanatos institute for healing.

"He has certainly made his mark," Qui-Gon murmured.

"Look at the library across the street," Obi-Wan said, pointing. "He funded that, too."

"The problem will not be finding him, obviously," Qui-Gon said. "The challenge will be to expose him for what he really is. The people love him. He has made sure of that. He has protected himself better by staying in the open than by hiding."

Obi-Wan scanned a sign that announced that Xanatos was providing the funds to restore a large city park. "He must have a reason behind all this," he observed.

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"He always has a reason," Qui-Gon agreed. "Naturally he wants to exert influence on Telos. But that is too broad a goal for him. We shall have to discover exactly what he intends."

"Hey, genius guys!"

They turned to see Den heading for them. "I thought you might need help finding UniFy," he said. "I realized that there's no sign on the building."

"What about the lottery?" Obi-Wan asked. "Isn't today your lucky day?"

"All my days are lucky, kid," Den said, falling into step next to them. "But I don't get a chance to do a good deed often enough."

"We were just noticing all the buildings Xanatos has built in Thani," Qui-Gon remarked. "He has been a true benefactor."

Den waved an arm. "In the past few years he's supported parks, libraries, med centers, the big healing institute — he's made a fortune in mining throughout the galaxy, but he doesn't hoard it. He spreads it around. That's more than any of those lottery winners will do, let me tell you."

They passed one of the pale blue information kiosks. Qui-Gon glanced at the information board on the front. To his shock, he saw his own face.

"Is this the main park in Thani?" he asked Den, sweeping an arm to the opposite side of the street, where a path beckoned beneath spreading trees.

Den turned away, as Qui-Gon had hoped he would. "No, it's one of the smaller ones. The largest is on the east side of the city."

The diversion gave Qui-Gon enough time to study the notice on the wall. After his picture faded on the screen, Obi-Wan's appeared. Wanted. Galactic criminals. Reward. He read the words in a flash.

So that was why the security police hadn't given up!

There could be only one explanation: Xanatos. He had arranged this. Now Qui-Gon understood his smile. He knew that

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it was only a matter of time before Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan were captured.

Even as he walked and exchanged conversation with Den, Qui-Gon's mind sifted through his options. Being on the street was not safe. Luckily, most people were in the Katharsis Dome, or they would have run the risk of being recognized. They needed to find somewhere safe, and then find a way to disguise themselves.

Qui-Gon raised his hood. It would conceal his face somewhat. "It's getting chilly," he remarked.

"We're almost there," Den replied.

He led them a few blocks on. A tall gray tower was surrounded by a high polished gate of bronze metal.

"Well, here we are. Do you have an appointment?" Den asked. "They won't let you in without an ID tag. It's top security."

Qui-Gon eyed the sleek facade of the building. There were no windows and there appeared to be only one entrance. Once they got in, they would have to get out the same way.

"Our appointment is for tomorrow," he said. "We just wanted to see where it was."

"Do you have a place to stay tonight?" Den asked. "I live in a place where you can rent guest rooms. It's close to here."

Qui-Gon hesitated. It had not slipped his notice that Den seemed to appear whenever they needed help. He did not sense danger from him, but he was still wary.

But an uneasiness that had nothing to do with Den had been ticking away inside him. Obi-Wan was now a wanted criminal. They had barely been on Telos an hour, and already the situation had escalated out of control. Qui-Gon had felt sure back on Coruscant that if events got out of hand, he would be able to order Obi-Wan back to the Temple. Now the boy was trapped on the planet. He would not be able to pass through security in order to leave.

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He had brought the boy into danger. He had done it with his eyes open. Guilt pierced him. He had to protect Obi-Wan now. He could not let his passion for bringing Xanatos to justice interfere with the boy's safety.

"Well, come along and have a look, at least," Den urged in a friendly way. "I'm only a few blocks away."

Qui-Gon nodded. He could see that Obi-Wan looked tired, and suddenly reflected that the boy had not eaten a bite since breakfast. Obi-Wan needed rest and food. He could find that for him at least.

He would trust his instincts. Den might be a gambler, but he didn't seem like such a bad character.

Den turned off the main road and led them down an alley that twisted behind the tall buildings. The structures grew more modest as they entered a residential area. Den led them to a shabby building painted in various shades of green, blue, and red.

"My landlady is paying me to paint the place, but she can't decide on a color," he explained with a grin.

He opened the door and ushered them into a small anteroom. "Riva?" he called toward the back of the house. "I brought guests. *Paying* guests." He leaned in closer to them. "That will bring her on the run."

As if on cue, Qui-Gon heard the soft sound of running feet.

Den grinned broadly. "See what I mean?"

"That's coming from outside." Qui-Gon strode to the window and moved the curtain a fraction to look at the street outside.

Security police were racing silently down the street. An officer signaled for them to surround the building.

Qui-Gon's hand fell onto the hilt of his light-saber. His instincts had been off. Den had be-trayed them. He had led them into a trap.

Chapter Five

As soon as Obi-Wan saw Qui-Gon reach for his lightsaber, he activated his own. The two weapons glowed pale blue and green in the dim light of the room.

Den stumbled backward. "Jedi! Whoa! I mean, I knew you were *weird*, but I didn't know you were Jedi."

"You betrayed us for the reward," Qui-Gon said.

"Who, me?" Den asked, holding a hand over his heart. "Joke, right? Kill me now, because I'm mortally wounded, I wouldn't betray a fellow criminal. Sure, I saw that alert. But I wouldn't turn you in."

"A fellow *what!*" Obi-Wan asked.

Den peered out the curtain. "Those security police could be here for me. I thought they were looking for me in the Katharsis Dome, too. Not that I'm a criminal, exactly. I'm more like a . . . facilitator."

"And why should we believe you?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Um, let's review. Because you're a criminal, too?" Den stepped back from the curtain. "You can put away those saber things. I've got a way out."

Obi-Wan exchanged a glance with Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon shrugged. What else could they do? Better to trust Den a little longer than to tangle with twenty security officers.

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Den led them down the hallway to the kitchen. He hurried to a panel in the wall and pushed it open. "After you," he said to Obi-Wan.

A foul smell rose in Obi-Wan's nostrils. "The garbage chute?"

"Do you have a better idea?" Den asked. "Okay, if you insist, I'll go first."

He swung himself into the small space and then let go. They heard the sound of banging and a small *ow!* Then Den's voice came to them hollowly.

"Uh, not that I want to tell two Jedi what to do, but you might want to speed it up."

Obi-Wan swung into the chute and let go. He bumped down past the remnants of rotten vegetables and food. His hand slid in something slimy, and then he tumbled out onto a large bin full of garbage. A moment later, Qui-Gon slid out next to him.

"That was a treat," Qui-Gon said, picking a rotten leaf off his tunic. "Thanks."

"My pleasure. This way," Den urged.

They climbed out of the garbage bin and followed Den through a hallway that was lined with shelves crammed with food tins. "Fifty years ago Telos had a famine," Den explained. "My landlady was only ten at the time, but she never forgot it. She's crazier than I am."

At last the dark hallway ended at a slanted door. "This will bring us up into the gardens," Den explained in a whisper. "It doesn't look as though it belongs to the house, so ten to one they won't have it surrounded."

"Ten to one?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Good odds!" Den assured him. "Look, you still don't trust me? Kill me now. Go ahead. Put me out of my misery. Run me through with that glowy tube thing if I'm wrong. No? Okay, come on."

Qui-Gon shot an amused look at Obi-Wan, which Obi-Wan answered with a frown. He didn't know why Qui-Gon always

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seemed to give his trust to the scoundrels they met. Yet when it came to Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon was strict and unbending.

Den eased open the slanted door overhead. They climbed up a short flight of stairs and slipped outside. They were surrounded by tall rows of a green-leafed plant.

Den jerked his head to indicate which way they should go. They could hear the security police kicking in the doors of the rooming house as they quickly made their way through the rustling plants, trying not to stir the leaves any more than the wind did.

When they reached the end of the field, Den hesitated.

"What do we do now?" Obi-Wan asked.

Suddenly, blaster fire ripped into the row of plants to their right.

"Um, let me think. Run?" Den suggested.

They took off, zigzagging through the remaining fields. Qui-Gon glanced back and saw the security police giving chase.

"We have a good lead," Den shouted. "We can outrun them. At least they're not on speeder bikes."

Just then, three speeder bikes took off after them.

"Oops," Den panted.

"Activate your lightsaber!" Qui-Gon called to Obi-Wan.

They did not slow their pace, keeping up with Den. The Force told them when to turn back and deflect the fire with their lightsabers.

Den zigzagged down a maze of alleys. The speeder bikes gained on them. "Just hang on, almost there," he called back.

They came to a field with a drainage pipe rising out of the grass. Den flattened himself and crawled in. Quickly, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon followed. The speeder bike engines buzzed angrily overhead. Blaster fire peppered the pipe but did not penetrate the metal.

"This goes underground and leads into a basement nearby," Den said. "They'll never find us."

"You said that before," Obi-Wan grunted.

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"I said ten-to-one," Den corrected. "I'll give you better odds this time."

On their hands and knees, they crawled through rusty water with a skin of muck on top.

"Den, what used to drain through this pipe?"

Qui-Gon asked. The smell was worse than the garbage chute.

"Don't ask," Den said cheerfully.

At last they saw a faint beam of light. They spilled out onto a basement floor, their tunics stained with rust, garbage, and a substance Obi-Wan did not want to identify.

Den led them upstairs and out a side door into an alley. He looked both ways, then over-head. "You see? Saved."

"Will you be safe from here?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Joke, right? You can't leave me now!" Den protested. "I'm not finished saving your necks yet. Come on, I led you into trouble. Let me lead you out again. I have a safe place for you to stay."

"Safe like the last place?" Obi-Wan asked.

"This place is different," Den assured them. "It's a hideout of a friend of mine. Look, the se-curity police will be everywhere. You need to lay low, even for a few hours."

"And why should we trust you?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Because you have no choice?" Den said.

"One always has a choice," Qui-Gon said. "But we'll follow."

Chapter Six

Obi-Wan couldn't believe it. Den was obviously a criminal. Why was Qui-Gon trusting him with their lives?

When Den walked ahead, he posed the same question to Qui-Gon. The Jedi only sighed.

"Think about it, Obi-Wan. We are criminals, too, at least in the eyes of the security police. Who can hide us better than those who are al-ready in hiding?"

Qui-Gon put his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. "Don't worry. The core of him is pure."

"Kill me now, because I can't feel it," Obi-Wan grumbled. Still he liked the comforting hand on his shoulder. It almost felt as though Qui-Gon and he were Master and apprentice again.

Den led them to another part of the city, well off the wide boulevards of the city's center. Here the buildings huddled together as if a cold wind had driven them closer for warmth and protection.

Den led them to a building in the middle of the block. Instead of entering, he slipped down an alley. A broken pipe hung down the side of the building, swinging free. Den pulled himself up and straddled it.

"It's easier than it looks," he said. He grinned at the exasperated expression on Obi-Wan's face. "Hey, kid. You've

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gone down a garbage chute and climbed through a drainpipe. I think you can do this."

With an irritated glance at Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan grabbed the pipe. From the street it had looked ready to fall on the first unsuspecting head, but he found that it was actually anchored firmly to the wall. There were small metal bolts screwed in the sides, undetectable from below but big enough to serve as handholds and footholds. Den was right — it was easier to climb than it looked.

Obi-Wan hoisted himself up and over the edge of the flat roof. A water tank rose in a corner, a rusting spiral staircase circling it up to a platform at the top.

"Don't tell me," Obi-Wan said. "We're going to jump in that water tank next."

"Joke!" Den said, chuckling. He crossed to the tank and knocked a rhythmic series of taps against it. A short rap answered him.

"She's in," he said. "Let's go."

Obi-Wan followed Den up the spiral staircase to the top of the tank. When he reached the platform, he saw that the ceiling was recessed. It was painted to look like dark water. Anyone from above would not be able to tell that this water tower was any different from the others that dotted the roofs nearby.

Den slid open a trap door and disappeared in-side. Obi-Wan followed.

To his relief, he found himself on a staircase leading down into a cozy apartment. The walls were round and made of durasteel. A thick rug was on the floor, and there were comfortable places to sit. In the center of the space was a long table piled with tech equipment.

A slender young woman rose from her seat at the table. Her hair was dark chestnut, wound in several braids around her head. Her eyes were a warm honey-brown. Right now they were trained suspiciously on Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan.

"Who have you brought me this time, Den?" she asked.

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"Friends," Den responded.

"They're always friends," she said warily. Her eyes flicked over their stained tunics. "And they're dressed so nicely, too."

"We had a little trouble getting here. But they might be able to help us." He turned to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. "This is Andra. She's the head of the POWER party — Preserve Our Wild Endangered Resources. Andra, this is Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, two Jedi visitors who seem to be wanted by the security police."

Her eyes narrowed. "Wanted? For what?"

Den took a piece of fruit from a bowl and tossed it to Obi-Wan. "Here, kid, you look hun-gry. What does it matter what they're wanted for, Andra? We need them. They want to know about UniFy."

Andra's suspicion changed to interest. She looked at them curiously.

"Maybe you could explain what it is you do," Qui-Gon suggested. "What is the POWER party?"

"We are a political party in opposition to those in control of the government," she answered. "Unfortunately, we're illegal right now. The government outlawed us. We were the first to raise the cry when the government gave the stewardship of our sacred places to UniFy. We asked why our land was turned over to private interests, why we were forced to trust the word of a corporation that they would preserve and protect the land. Most didn't listen. They were happy to have the tax burden taken away. But some did listen, and joined us. We're made up of former government officials, scientists, environmental workers, ordinary citizens who listened back when we were allowed to speak. Now we've gone into hiding and meet here when we can."

"Do you have proof that UniFy is mishandling your sacred spaces?" Qui-Gon asked.

She hesitated. "We had evidence that something is going on at the Sacred Pools. Three people went to the global park to gather images and evidence. They were killed in a speeder accident on

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the way back to Thani. They told me that they had hard evidence of something, but they didn't say what it was. I think their death was no accident. The evidence they were bring-ing back was destroyed. We are mobilizing to make another trip." She pushed impatiently at a stray hair that had escaped a braid. "It's diffi-cult. Security is very tight at the global parks. They say they need to keep people away until the land is reclaimed. We think they are exploit-ing it, mapping it for further development."

"Why don't the people of Telos ask more questions about what is being done?" Qui-Gon asked. "This world is known for the conservation of its natural beauties. Even from an eco-nomic standpoint, it doesn't make sense. Tourism is a large industry here."

Andra looked bleak. "Katharsis. The people are obsessed with betting on it, with hoping they'll be chosen in the lottery. And they don't worry about the tourists — more come for Katharsis now than the global parks. Greed has entered the people like a fever." She gave Qui-Gon a cool questioning look. "So why do you think you can help?"

"I don't," Qui-Gon said bluntly. "That was Den's idea."

"You seem very interested in UniFy," Den said. "This is only a guess, but I have a feeling that you don't have an appointment tomorrow."

Qui-Gon said nothing. Obi-Wan admired his reserve. He was able to convey patience and a willingness to listen without giving anything away.

"So are you an environmentalist like Andra?" Obi-Wan asked Den.

Before he could answer, Andra laughed. "You mean have a commitment to something bigger than himself? Not Den. Our arrangement is strictly for credits."

"Hey, wait a second," Den said huffily. "I have just as many ideals as the next guy."

"If the next guy happens to be a smuggler or a thief," Andra shot back. She turned back to Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon. "When

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we first went underground, we needed tech equipment. I had to forage for computer parts and comlinks on the black market. That's how I met Den. He's been smuggling the parts we need to keep going. We've managed to get out an underground paper alerting the people to what we think is happening. But Den's allegiance is only to the credits I can give him."

"Excuse me for needing money to live, Captain Integrity," Den said to Andra. "Not everyone can live on ideals. Especially when they don't pay rent. If it weren't for me, you'd be talking to these walls instead of the 'people' out there."

"How like you to claim our success as your own," Andra said coolly.

"See what you get when you try to help people?" Den grumbled to the Jedi. "Insults. No wonder I'm a thief."

Andra ignored him and turned back to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. "You can stay here if you like. Any enemy of UniFy is a friend of mine."

"I didn't say I was an enemy of UniFy," Qui-Gon said with a smile.

She studied him for a moment. "But you are, aren't you? Maybe Den is right. Maybe we can help each other. But you have to tell me why you're here. Not to mention why you're wanted by the security police."

"I'm not sure what the charge is, but I'm sure it's serious," Qui-Gon admitted. "It's false, whatever it is. We have a powerful enemy on Telos. I believe he is using UniFy as a shell corporation for his own company."

"Which is?" Andra asked.

"Offworld."

Andra let out a long breath. "Offworld . . . They are the largest mining concern in the galaxy." Two spots of color appeared on her cheeks. "But that means that UniFy could be mapping our lands for mining development! If we could prove the two companies are linked, we'd have proof of UniFy's plans!"

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"Andra hired me to break into the UniFy files," Den told them. "I worked there a few months ago, and I forgot to turn in my ID badge. I had to leave in a hurry."

"You forgot?" Qui-Gon asked.

Den grinned. "And then I mistakenly took a couple extra badges when I left. So I can get us in. The odds are totally in our favor."

Qui-Gon hesitated. He turned to Andra. "You don't seem to trust him. Why should we?"

"Because I won't let you down!" Den cried.

"I did not ask you the question," Qui-Gon said sternly.

Andra sighed. "What's in it for you, Den? Why would you take the risk of breaking in again?"

"Because I didn't finish the job you paid me for," Den told her. "I feel badly about that. I have my integrity, you know."

"You're a thief!" Andra cried in exasperation. "Exactly!" Den exclaimed. "So let me steal!" "Why don't I feel reassured?" Obi-Wan wondered aloud.

Andra sighed. "I know exactly what you mean."

Chapter Seven

Besides the identity cards, Den had managed to steal the gray unisuits that the lowest level of tech workers at UniFy wore. It was surprisingly easy to join the stream of workers entering the building at dawn the next day. The security guards swiped their cards and they simply walked through.

Sure, we're in, Obi-Wan thought. *But will it be as easy to get out again?* For some reason, Qui-Gon had decided to trust this Den character. And the Jedi Council thought *he* was too impulsive.

Den took the turbolift down to a lower level. "The main files are in a restricted area," he explained. "We'll have to walk down the utility staircase. Then there's a guard at the door. Can you wave those lightsabers of yours at him? We can lock him in a closet until we're done."

"Just leave it to me," Qui-Gon said.

They slipped down the utility staircase and entered a long white hallway lit with soothing glow lights. A security guard sat in front of a console at the end.

"Passes," he said shortly.

Qui-Gon handed him his identity card. He focused on the Telosian's mind. "This will do. Go on in."

"This will do," the guard said. "Go on in." The door hissed open, and they walked through.

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"What was that?" Den asked wonderingly.

"A Jedi tool," Qui-Gon answered. "The Force can easily be used on the weak-minded."

"I am impressed," Den said, shaking his head in admiration. "Can you imagine what you could do with that, if you had a little larceny in you? Hey, do you think your Jedi Temple would take a guy like me?"

"No," Qui-Gon said shortly, accessing the door marked secure files.

The room was filled with computers and holographic files. Den crossed immediately to the main terminal.

"I'll break into the system, and the two of you can search on the other monitors," he said, his fingers flying over the keys. "They changed the password, but I wrote a program that . . . there we go! Call me a genius and I won't argue with you."

Qui-Gon sat at another terminal and motioned Obi-Wan to the next. It would be faster if they all searched independently.

Files names and numbers flashed onscreen. There were many marked sacred pools. "There are at least three hundred files here," Qui-Gon said after a moment. "Let's break it down. Den, you take the first hundred, Obi-Wan the next. I'll do the last. Scan as quickly as you can. Look for any mention of Offworld, mining, or mapping." He looked over at Den. "Don't try anything."

Den blinked at him innocently. "Like what?"

"I don't want to speculate," Qui-Gon said dryly. "Just do what I say."

Obi-Wan accessed the first file and quickly scanned it. It was a record of correspondence between the manager of the Sacred Pools project and his superior at UniFy. As far as he could see, it was reporting fuel and food needs for the workers. Nothing. He accessed the next.

And the next. And the next. .. Obi-Wan waded through file after file. He never imagined that working for a large corporation

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could be so dull. Information was repeated over and over and double-checked. He saw nothing suspicious.

"I wish Tahl were here," Qui-Gon muttered. "She would be able to figure out these financial records. They make everything so complicated ..."

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stopped talking. Obi-Wan noticed that his viewscreen had frozen. When he looked back at his own, he saw that it was frozen as well.

"Den, what's happening?" he asked.

"I don't know," Den said worriedly. He tried to turn his viewscreen off, but the switch didn't work. "Odds are it's a temporary glitch." He sprang up from his chair and started toward the door. "Just lay low."

"Where are you going?" Qui-Gon asked.

"I'm just going to nose around, see what's going on. You can rely on me."

Den slipped out the door. Qui-Gon slowly rose.

"We have to get out of here now," he said.

Obi-Wan looked at him, surprised. "But we can't abandon Den."

Qui-Gon looked grim. "He has already abandoned us."

Obi-Wan heard the sound of pounding feet. The door hissed open.

"Don't draw your lightsaber," Qui-Gon quickly ordered, just before the security forces rushed in.

Obi-Wan knew why. Qui-Gon was hoping to escape detection as a wanted criminal. If they were lucky, they would be held at UniFy as trespassers.

But that fleeting hope was dashed immediately when the burly head of security stepped forward.

"You are wanted as violators of Telosian law under the Galactic Criminals Act," he told them. "You are under arrest."

Chapter Eight

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were swiftly transported to the Central Booking Station, where they were recognized as escaped galactic criminals and thrown into prison. Qui-Gon asked that the Temple be contacted, but the request was ignored.

"Telosian justice used to be fair," he said to Obi-Wan as he stood in the dank underground cell. "They should allow us the opportunity to clear ourselves."

"We're not even sure what the charges are," Obi-Wan said. "Do you think they'll discover that the whole thing has been faked?"

"There is always that hope," Qui-Gon said. "They can't hold us for long if they can't prove we did something wrong. At least they didn't find our lightsabers."

Using the Force, Qui-Gon had managed to prevent the guards from giving them a thorough search.

"Why don't we just cut through the door?" Obi-Wan asked, placing his hands against the fortified durasteel.

"Because there will be fifty guards on us before we can move very far," Qui-Gon said. "Let's bide our time. We'll find an opportunity to escape."

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"I can't believe Den left us in the lurch like that," Obi-Wan said, disgusted. "He must have known there was a security alert as soon as the viewscreens froze."

"Yes, I think he did," Qui-Gon agreed calmly. "But it is better to focus on what we can do now."

"What can we do?" Obi-Wan asked. "We're locked up."

"We can think of our next step," Qui-Gon said. "It's a waste of time to blame Den. What did we learn while we were at UniFy?"

"I didn't learn anything except that people who work for companies send too many memos," Obi-Wan said, discouraged.

"There were many, it's true," Qui-Gon agreed. "And most of them were trivial. Many of them merely confirmed a conversation over a comlink. Did you notice that? This makes me think that so many files could be a way to stop examiners later should the company be investigated. It's hard to find the truth when it's buried under data. Does that remind you of anything?" Obi-Wan thought for a long moment. "Offworld," he said at last. "The company conceals its true intentions and even its headquarters behind other companies. It uses confusion to hide."

"Exactly," Qui-Gon said. "And there was something else I learned at UniFy. When the screens froze, I got to see what Den was doing. He was not looking up files on Offworld or the Sacred Pools. He was looking up Katharsis."

"Why?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I don't know the answer to that, but the question is interesting," Qui-Gon said. "UniFy administers the funds from the lottery, so I suppose it should have Katharsis files. But why is Den so interested? Think about his character."

Obi-Wan remembered Andra's words. "He must think he can profit in some way."

"Exactly," Qui-Gon agreed. "My guess is that's the reason he agreed to help us in the first place. So you see when we get out, we'll have another path to investigate."

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"When we get out?" Obi-Wan asked, looking at the fortified durasteel door.

"We'll get out," Qui-Gon said in the same calm tone.

Obi-Wan wished he could feel as certain. He had a feeling that now that Xanatos had them where he wanted them, he would not be so foolish as to let them go.

They spent a cold night in the cell. Obi-Wan awoke before dawn. He lay on a sleep mat, his eyes open. There were no windows in the cell, so he could not distinguish the walls from the floor. He was surrounded by black, as though he were floating in a void. Perhaps this disorienting feeling was part of the punishment.

The only indication of morning was when the cell lights blazed on. They were given some hard bread and weak tea for breakfast.

The day passed slowly. Qui-Gon asked repeatedly to speak to someone in authority. The request was refused.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan did a series of muscle stretches to stay limber. Then they meditated. In captivity, a Jedi organized the mind, calmed the spirit, and kept the body strong.

Qui-Gon sat meditating on the hard stone floor. Suddenly, he sighed and raised his head.

"I'm sorry, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan was surprised by this statement. "Sorry?" he asked.

"You should be back at the Temple. I should not have let you accompany me. It was an error in judgment."

"The decision was mine to make," Obi-Wan said. "I'm not sorry to be here."

Qui-Gon's smile was as dim as the light. "Even though you are cold and hungry?"

"I am where I should be," Obi-Wan responded. "By your side."

Qui-Gon stood. "I was harsh to you after what happened on Melida/Daan."

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"No more than I deserved." Obi-Wan was surprised to see the emotion on Qui-Gon's face. This was the first time his former Master had brought up the rift between them with sorrow more than anger. He seemed to be struggling for words.

"No, Obi-Wan, it was much more than you deserved," Qui-Gon corrected. "I have come to see that my reaction was due to my own fail-ings, not yours. I haven't had a chance to tell you that. I —" Qui-Gon stopped suddenly. "He's here," he murmured.

Then Obi-Wan felt it, too. The disturbance in the Force was like a whisper of poison gas that snaked under a crack in the door and then filled the room. He stood and turned toward the door.

The durasteel door suddenly hissed open. Xanatos stood in the doorway. His black cloak was thrown back, his legs casually apart, his hands on his hips.

"Enjoying yourselves?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow at them and smiling.

Qui-Gon faced him, not speaking.

"Ah, the silent treatment," Xanatos said with a sigh. "And here I was hoping that we could have a chat. There's not much time. Your pun-ishment has been decided."

"But we didn't have a trial," Qui-Gon said quietly.

"Oh, but you did," Xanatos answered. "You were both considered too dangerous to attend."

"We have the right to attend our own trial! That isn't fair!" Obi-Wan exclaimed.

Xanatos shook his head. "Ah, I remember being that young. Back when I thought that life would treat me fairly. Before I met you, Qui-Gon Jinn."

"Life does not treat you fairly or unfairly," Qui-Gon said. "It merely is. It is up to each of us to be fair, or unfair."

"It's never too late for some great Jedi wisdom," Xanatos said scornfully. "And it is al-ways the same — nothing but riddles. Well, figure this out, Jedi — since you did not appear at your

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trial, I showed up in your place. I was the star witness against you. I had evidence of your crimes, records of the many worlds that brought charges against you, tales of the times you had escaped justice throughout the galaxy. And at last justice found you on Telos. It also helped that a grieving father was in the court-room, distraught at the death of his son at the hands of your accomplice." Xanatos gave a heavy sigh. "Poor Bruck. I always thought he just needed a little push to succeed. How was I to know that Obi-Wan Kenobi would deliver it?"

Xanatos raised one hand and then slapped it into his palm with a sharp *crack*. It was eerily close to the crack of Bruck's head hitting the rocks below the waterfall. Obi-Wan tried not to wince. He would not give Xanatos that satisfaction. But inside, he felt the shock of it. Helplessness and guilt swept over him as he recalled Bruck's lifeless, unseeing gaze, the arm flung out as if in a last, desperate cry for help.

"The court may have listened to your lies," Qui-Gon said quickly, sensing Obi-Wan's distress and trying to deflect Xanatos. "But when the Temple learns —"

Xanatos laughed. "By the time the Temple learns of your fate, you will already be dead. That is your punishment, Jedi. You have been sentenced to death."

Suddenly Xanatos leaned forward. His blue eyes burned like the hottest part of a flame. His pale skin seemed to tighten over his bones. His face looked like a skull with eyes of fire.

"And I will be there to watch you die," he hissed in Qui-Gon's face.

Chapter Nine

They did not get a chance to say another word, or call for help. Xanatos made sure that an entire troop of guards surrounded them. They were led through the prison corridors to the courtyard in front.

The sun was low in the sky. The two adjacent prison towers cast two long ominous shadows across the courtyard. A crowd filled the yard and spilled out into the street. When they saw the prisoners, they erupted in catcalls and jeers.

"They love the executions," one of the guards murmured to the other.

Qui-Gon felt a sinister energy emanating from the crowd. Telos had never had public executions. Such displays were limited to more prim-itive worlds. What had happened to peaceful Telos? It only took one man to corrupt it, if that man was as sly and powerful as Xanatos.

Qui-Gon felt reassured by the presence of his lightsaber underneath his cloak. Still, he did not know when he would get a chance to use it.

A scaffold slowly rose on repulsorlifts until it floated high above the crowd. Two burly guards stood next to two durasteel hinged slabs. A chute ran from the slabs to the edge of the platform. Vibro-axes were leaning against the slabs. Qui-Gon

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saw in an instant how the execution would take place. He and Obi-Wan would be forced to lie on the slabs. They would be be-headed by the vibro-axes, the hinges would drop, and their heads would roll down the chute and come to rest facing the crowd.

It was gruesome, but quick.

Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan swallow. For the first time, he was seriously worried. He had thought that at any moment an opportunity would come for them to escape. But how could they make their way through the crowd? Even if they could deal with the guards and Xanatos, the crowd would rise against them.

They were placed in an energy cage that was hoisted up above the mass of people. The angry crowd shouted for their deaths to be painful and slow. Xanatos stood at the top of the stairs, watching the cage rise with avid eyes.

It was the duty of every Jedi to accept death when it came. Yet Qui-Gon could not be calm. It not his time. It was not Obi-Wan's. He saw that Obi-Wan was struggling to contain his fear.

"Kill them! Kill the murderers!" the crowd shouted.

Anger surged in Qui-Gon. Xanatos had done this. He had inflamed the crowd. He had filled their minds with hatred and lies. If Qui-Gon died, Xanatos would win. He would corrupt Telos even more. He would destroy it.

Qui-Gon couldn't let that happen.

Yet he must not fight with anger. He must fight with justice.

"We must not give up," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan urgently over the noise of the crowd. "They will need to retract the energy bars for the executioners to get us on those slabs. That's when we will fight. All is not lost. Stay calm and alert."

Obi-Wan nodded.

Qui-Gon noted the steady resolution in Obi-Wan's eyes. They had little chance of escaping this fate, but Obi-Wan accepted this. The boy was never cowed by odds against him.

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The energy cage slowly lowered toward the scaffold. Security police on swoops hovered near in case the prisoners tried to escape.

The cries of the crowd came to Qui-Gon faintly. All his attention was now focused on the guards on the scaffold. He was confident that he and Obi-Wan could take them. But what then? They would have to leap to the ground, even as blaster fire pounded them from above and below. Perhaps the surprise of their move would increase the likelihood of escape. Perhaps the crowd was not as bloodthirsty as it appeared. But he did not like these odds. Even Den would not take this bet, Qui-Gon thought ruefully.

The guards on the scaffold walked forward. Qui-Gon waited for the energy bars to lower. As soon as they did, he would spring forward.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noted an erratic movement from one of the swoops. He looked to the side without turning his head. The rider was hooded. In only the split second he allowed himself to glance, Qui-Gon recognized who it was. The surprise hit him broadside. Andra.

"Behind you, Obi-Wan," he said in a low voice. "Be prepared."

The energy bars retracted. The guards rushed forward. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan activated their lightsabers simultaneously and leaped toward them. Blaster fire pinged around them, and they deflected it, swinging in a blur of motion faster than the eye could follow.

Another swoop joined Andra. The two crafts dived toward them, engines screaming.

"Jump!" he called to Obi-Wan. He leaped off the scaffold as the swoop dived to scoop him up. The other vehicle did the same for Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon caught a quick flash of a determined

Den.

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Qui-Gon landed on his feet. He held on to the driver's shoulders and lowered himself into the seat as the swoop dived, turned, climbed, hovered, and turned again, trying to evade the guards giving chase.

Qui-Gon still had his lightsaber in his hand. He deflected blaster fire as the craft darted around the guards. He saw Obi-Wan doing the same. It was hard to keep his balance on the agile swoop, but he managed.

In a daring move, the swoops headed straight for the prison towers. Qui-Gon saw the towers grow closer and closer, so close he could see the cracks and pits in the surface. At the very last moment, Andra turned sharply. They came so close that Qui-Gon's hand was scraped. Two of the swoops pursuing them crashed into the towers. Andra and Den zoomed away.

Qui-Gon allowed himself one glance back. The last thing he saw was Xanatos, standing straight and tall and unmoving, watching him go. He could feel the coiled hatred spring at him from across the distance. They would meet again, he knew. Xanatos would make sure of it.

Chapter Ten

When she was sure they were away from their pursuers, Andra loosened her hood.

"Thanks for not falling off," she called back to Qui-Gon.

"Thanks for rescuing us," Qui-Gon responded. "I was almost starting to worry."

She grinned and gunned the motor. In another few minutes, they landed in the alley near her house. Den and Andra concealed the swoops behind a pile of rusty abandoned floaters.

"Whoa!" Den called as he swept off his hood. "Did we beat those odds, or what? The next time I'm outrunning some security police, I want a Jedi at my back!"

Obi-Wan didn't respond to Den's friendly grin. "You wouldn't have had to rescue us if you'd warned us back at UniFy," he pointed out.

"I was about to," Den protested. "I didn't get the chance. At least I came through in the end."

"Only because I insisted," Andra said. "I'm the one who proposed the rescue."

"Kill me now if I wasn't going to! You didn't give me a chance!" Den protested.

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"I suggest we continue this inside," Qui-Gon said, his eyes sweeping the sky overhead with a glance. "In my experience, security on Telos doesn't give up easily."

They climbed up the drain and entered Andra's snug home. Andra began to heat some drinks and set out a plate of bread and fruit. Obi-Wan reached for it hungrily.

"I don't know what to do now," Andra said worriedly. "We can't break into UniFy again. I'm sure they plugged the holes in their security. We'll never be able to get the proof we need that UniFy is tied to Offworld."

"If only we'd had more time to look," Den said.

Qui-Gon gave him a hard look. "But you weren't looking very hard for an Offworld connection, were you?"

Den shifted in his seat. "Of course I was. There were too many files. You said so yourself."

"I saw your screen, Den," Qui-Gon said. "You weren't looking at the Sacred Pool files. You were looking up Katharsis."

"Katharsis?" Andra turned. "Why?"

"Don't look at me like that, all of you," Den protested. "I'm an honest man!"

Qui-Gon cocked an eyebrow. Obi-Wan looked disgusted. Andra blew out an exasperated breath.

"Okay, so I'm not one hundred percent honest," Den admitted. "But I'm loyal! I was look-ing up Katharsis. When I worked there I found out by chance — well, not so much by chance, but because I broke into some files — that UniFy controls Katharsis."

Andra swiveled, the pot in her hand. "You mean the government doesn't control it?"

Den nodded. "They just want you to think they do. If everyone knew that a corporation controlled Katharsis, they'd realize that. .."

"UniFy decides how the profits from Katharsis are spent," Andra said rapidly. "Which means they totally control our public lands."

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Den nodded. "UniFy came up with the idea for Katharsis in the first place. They paid off some key government people in order to push it through. Basically, the government is in UniFy's pocket."

Andra sank into a chair, stunned. "Do you think that UniFy deliberately devised Katharsis just to distract the population from their intentions? They're going to open all our global parks for development. And we're going to pay for it!"

"It's pretty diabolical," Den said. "You almost have to admire it. Some kind of evil genius had to come up with this plan."

Qui-Gon exchanged a glance with Obi-Wan. "Xanatos," he said quietly. The plan had a simple elegance to its evil that was pure Xanatos.

But Qui-Gon wasn't finished with Den. "Why were you looking up Katharsis again, Den?" he asked. "If you knew this already, there wasn't much more to discover."

They all turned to Den. He met their gaze with steady innocence. That meant he was no doubt about to lie, Qui-Gon guessed.

"I was just hoping to help Andra and the POWER party —" he started.

Andra interrupted him. "Don't con me. Den. Not now. This is too important."

He looked at her a long moment. Qui-Gon noticed the vulnerability in the look. *He cares for her*, he realized.

"Okay," he said. "I was hoping to help you. But I was also looking for a way to rig the lottery."

"Always looking out for yourself, aren't you?" Andra said bitterly.

"No," Den said quietly. "I look out for you, too. But you won't see that."

"So did you find out how to rig it?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Not exactly," Den hedged.

"Did you find out anything?" Obi-Wan asked impatiently.

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"Yes, I found out something," Den admitted. "The lottery already *is* rigged."

Chapter Eleven

"Things are happening too fast here," Andra said weakly. "Let me pour the tea."

They sat around the table, warm mugs of tea in their hands. The enormity of the plan stunned Andra. She had expected conspiracies and corruption, but not on such a vast scale. It was obvious that they had stumbled on a scheme to take over the resources of an entire planet. The question was how the pieces fit together, and what they could do about it.

Qui-Gon drained his mug. "I suggest a two-part plan," he said. "First, Den will infiltrate the lottery system."

"Whoa, hold on," Den said. "What do you mean, I'll infiltrate the lottery system? What makes you think I can do that?"

"I have a feeling you already know how," Qui-Gon said coolly. "Why else would you risk so much to get back inside UniFy? Why else did the security get triggered? You were able to invade the system."

Den took a gulp of tea, then coughed. No one moved to help him.

"Okay, okay," he croaked. "I think I can rig it. I mean, I think I can rig the part that's already rigged."

"And you know how to ensure that you'll win the prize," Qui-Gon said.

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Den nodded reluctantly. "I can rig it so that I win the lottery. One winner is always someone selected by UniFy in advance. As the games go on, some contestants are given faulty equipment — not anything they would notice, but something slightly off that decreases their chances of winning. One of the contestants has been selected in advance and bribed. He or she agrees to pass half the fortune back under the table to the company. I can just put my name in the next winner's place."

Andra shook her head. "I knew you had an ulterior motive to helping me. You were going to take that fortune and run."

"Joke, right?" Den said. "Because I can't believe you would really think such a thing. After I won my fortune, I would have shared it. Some of it."

"I don't want any part of a fortune built on destroying our sacred spaces," Andra said fiercely. "And you shouldn't either!"

"It's not my fault they're being exploited!" Den protested. "And a fortune is a fortune."

"That's your trouble," Andra said. "You really believe that."

"Does anyone want to hear the second part of my plan?" Qui-Gon interrupted mildly. "Second, we should follow through on Andra's original plan to visit the Sacred Pools. We'll need to gather the evidence all over again."

"It won't be easy," Andra said. "The security is extremely tight."

"Just use some of that Jedi mind-altering-voice-bending stuff," Den suggested.

"I'm afraid we'll need more than that," Qui-Gon said. "Andra, can you call in your supporters? I think the best plan is to infiltrate at several points so that we don't rely on only one team."

Andra looked down at her mug. She smoothed the wood of the table with her hand.

"Andra?" Qui-Gon prodded.

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She looked up. "I can't do that," she said. "I haven't been completely honest with you all. I have no supporters. I am the POWER party."

"There's no party?" Obi-Wan asked in disbelief.

She shrugged and gave a small smile. "Just me. I had a few supporters, but they all fell away when the investigative team was killed. No one will listen to me anymore. They all think I'm crazy because I see a bleak future no one wants to face, let alone prevent."

Suddenly, Den burst out laughing. "So Captain Integrity has been lying all along!" he chortled. "This is the best news I've heard in a millennium!"

"Knock it off, Den," Andra growled. "I had to pretend to have support. I needed you to help me."

"Right," Den said, nodding. "Of course. You're allowed to trick someone because you're saving the planet. I get it. As long as you have pure motive, you can do whatever you want."

"That's not what I'm saying," Andra shot back angrily. "If you cared about anything other than yourself, you'd understand."

"I understand that you'd do anything to get what you want," Den said. "We're more alike than you want to admit, Andra."

Andra glared at him. "I'd rather be compared to a dinko."

"Sure, I can do that," Den said promptly. "A dinko is a creature with fangs and a nasty disposition. The problem is, how are you different? Let me see your teeth."

"Just keep it up, Den," Andra warned.

"Okay, enough," Qui-Gon snapped. "We have a problem. Who's going to invade the Sacred Pools?"

"I will," Andra said, with a furious glance at Den.

"I'll go with you," Obi-Wan said.

Qui-Gon shook his head. "No."

"But it makes sense," Obi-Wan argued. "A boy traveling with a woman won't attract as much attention. We'd look like a brother and sister on an excursion. If we get caught, Andra and I can claim we got lost."

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"And you should stay here and watch Den," Andra said to Qui-Gon. "If he rigs the lottery, he could take the fortune and leave the planet."

"Thanks for your support," Den said sarcastically.

"Have you given me any reason to trust you lately?" Andra asked coolly.

"Dinko," Den shot at her.

"Thief," she shot back.

Qui-Gon ignored their bickering for the moment. He felt exasperated and worried. He didn't want Obi-Wan to travel without him. Xanatos was on the loose, on his home planet, and he was enraged at their escape. But the boy's logic was sound. They had to take a risk in order to bring Xanatos down. But was this risk more than he was willing to take?

He saw Obi-Wan watching him. The boy was wondering why he didn't want him to go. For Obi-Wan, it would be a question of trust. Qui-Gon had to allow it.

"All right," he said. "Obi-Wan and Andra will gather the evidence. Den and I will remain here. Now let's make our preparations."

Chapter Twelve

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon stood by the swoops that would carry Obi-Wan and Andra to the Sacred Pools. Andra stood nearby with Den, checking her survival pack.

Obi-Wan had only slept for a few hours, but he felt alert and clear. A scattering of stars twinkled in the dark sky. Dawn was still an hour away. Andra felt their best chance was to invade the park in the early morning, gather pictures and evidence, and leave. They would have to be back in Thani by midday, before the end of the last round of Katharsis.

"If there is a sign of trouble, just go," Qui-Gon instructed him quietly. "If you think you cannot evade security, don't even attempt to enter the area. Survey it first."

"I've studied the maps," Obi-Wan said. "Andra knows of a way to enter without being noticed. She used it when she was a girl. She thinks it will still be there."

"Studying the map is not the same as knowing the area," Qui-Gon said. "Do not trust it completely. Make sure your entrance can be your exit."

"I know all these things," Obi-Wan said. He felt frustrated and disappointed. Qui-Gon was treating him like a fourth-year student at the Temple. He knew if Qui-Gon took him back that

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they would have to start over as a Master-Padawan team, but did Obi-Wan have to turn back into a child?

Qui-Gon nodded. "I know you do. It is my own unease that makes me repeat these things. I trust you, Obi-Wan."

The words trickled through Obi-Wan and filled him with warmth.

"I will not fail," he said.

"Just be safe," Qui-Gon responded.

Andra lifted her hood over her dark braids as she strode forward. "Ready, Obi-Wan?"

He swung his leg over the swoop. Qui-Gon had given him a quick lesson earlier. He wasn't used to such maneuverable transport. A slight touch could cause it to lean and dive. Obi-Wan was a fast learner, but it had taken him time before Qui-Gon was satisfied with his skill.

Andra gunned her motor and took off. Obi-Wan followed.

"Don't take any chances!" Den called after them.

"He sounds worried," Obi-Wan called over to Andra.

She gritted her teeth. "He's just trying to pretend to be a good person. It's a strain."

The black sky turned to gray as they traveled through the quiet outskirts of the city. Buildings grew farther apart. Land began to be cultivated. Then after the sun rose there were barely any dwellings at all, just occasional villages tucked into deep valleys.

Obi-Wan marveled at the beauty of the countryside. Fields of lavender and blue flowers swayed in a gentle breeze. Every few kilometers they came upon another deep blue lake glittering in the folds of the golden hills.

"This is beautiful country," he called over to Andra as they flew.

"I was born here," she said. "There's a proposal to turn much of this into another global park. But now I wonder why. Will they develop this, too?"

Jude Watson

That reminded Obi-Wan why he was here. He hunched over the swoop handlebars, determined to foil whatever terrible scheme Xanatos had for Telos.

The land began to climb, the hills growing higher and steeper. Rock formations towered above them as they followed a road cut into the stone mountains. Snow began to appear on the crags. Although Obi-Wan had felt too warm earlier, now he was glad he had followed Andra's advice and worn his thermal gear.

"Almost there," Andra called back.

Obi-Wan followed Andra as she left the road, entering a forest glade so thick with tall trees that it blocked out the sky. Andra wove expertly through the trunks. Obi-Wan had to concentrate to keep up. At last she pulled over and waited for him to stop next to her.

"I think we should leave the swoops here," she said. "This glade adjoins the park. I know a way into the Mirror Caverns. Once we're through them, we'll be in the Park of Sacred Pools."

They covered the swoops with branches. Their footsteps made soft sounds on the carpet of leaves as they hurried through the glade. They came to a craggy wall of stone, and Andra followed it down a small hill to a fast-moving creek. She hopped from rock to rock in the creek, Obi-Wan following. The creek suddenly stopped at a sheer wall of gray stone.

"I think you can make it," Andra said, glancing back at him. "But you might have to wriggle a bit."

Obi-Wan saw that there was a slight fissure in the rock wall, almost invisible to the naked eye. It ran from the creek up the wall, as tall as he was. First, Andra pushed her survival pack through, then slipped inside. Andra was slender and was easily able to pass through, but Obi-Wan had a bit more trouble. He made himself as thin as possible and popped out, almost falling. He threw out a hand to steady himself and felt a smooth, polished surface.

Andra activated a glow rod. Obi-Wan saw that he was in a cavern with walls that arched over his head. The stone was deep

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black and so highly polished that he could see his reflection. Here the creek was just a trickle of silver snaking through the black floor. The beam of the glow rod bounced from wall to wall, multiplying its light. Obi-Wan felt dizzy, as though he were standing underneath a thousand stars.

"It's incredible," he said.

"Yes," Andra said quietly. "It's beautiful, isn't it? The stone is called malab. It's highly prized in the galaxy since it's so rare. Come on, the exit is this way. Watch your step, it's slippery."

She led him through twists and turns until they joined the main cave. At the entrance, the cavern widened and some light from outside illuminated the walls. Andra let out a small cry. She lifted the glow rod to examine the wall. Stone had been chipped away, leaving deep gouges in the smooth surface. The samples were piled on the floor next to scan grids. Splinters of the stone surrounded a jagged hole in the polished floor.

"They're going to mine it," she whispered to Obi-Wan, her eyes burning. "This is a sacred place for all Telosians. Look what they've done!"

With trembling hands, she removed the holographic recorder from her pack. She trained the lens on the piles of stone, panning back and forth to the scan grids and the jagged holes. Obi-Wan took a recording rod from his pack and shot the same images. Now they would have a backup, just in case. He could conceal the recording rod in his clothing.

"Come on," Obi-Wan urged.

Carefully, they edged out of the cavern. The morning sun was strong, warming the cool rocks and lighting up golden sand that surrounded deep pools of steaming black water. A black hill rose in front of them. It glittered in the rays of the sun.

"That hill is made of malab," Andra said in disbelief. "They must be harvesting it from the caverns."

Obi-Wan looked at the heavy equipment and gravsleds surrounding the pools. He had spent time on the mining planet of Bandomeer and was familiar with mining machinery.

Jude Watson

"Those are mole miners," he said, pointing. "They can dig hundreds of kilometers deep. If there are mole miners, there has to be a base where they unload. Those vehicles are TNTs."

"TNTs?" Andra asked.

"Treaded neutron torches," Obi-Wan explained. "They have fireball-shooting cannons that blast through rock. That's how mine shafts are created. I'd say we've got a full-scale operation going here."

He felt Andra stiffen beside him. "The pools ..." she said. "The water used to be crystal clear."

Obi-Wan walked closer to examine a pool. As he leaned over, the cord on his survival pack dropped into the water. Steam rose in a hiss, and he pulled up the pack quickly. The cord had dissolved.

He looked up at Andra. "What happened?"

"I don't know," she said. "The pool must be contaminated. Let's look at the others."

They gathered a few long sticks and walked to the rest of the pools. When they submerged a stick in the black water, it was stripped of bark immediately. If they held it under longer, the stick itself dissolved.

"The underground spring that fed the pools must be contaminated with chemicals," Andra said. Her voice was thick. "My father used to take me here as a girl. We hiked every inch of the park and bathed in the steam pools. After he died, this was the only place where I could find comfort."

When she looked up, Andra's honey-colored eyes glittered with unshed tears. Obi-Wan didn't know how to comfort her. What would Qui-Gon do?

He remembered an incident back at the Temple. Jedi Knight Tahl had only recently lost her sight. She was feeling helpless and angry. He remembered how Qui-Gon had quietly acknowledged her pain, then given her something to focus on.

"I'm sorry, Andra," he told her. "If we expose them, we will stop them. It's not too late."

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She nodded, biting on her lip to stop the tears from falling. "Let's do it."

Her mouth set in determination, Andra turned the holographic recorder toward the pools. Obi-Wan used his recording rod to sweep the area and record the equipment. He tried to find a logo or name on various items to indicate they were owned by Offworld, but he found nothing.

Obi-Wan frowned worriedly. "We can bring this back and show it to the citizens of Thani, but we need to connect it to Xanatos. The government can claim they knew nothing about it. They can blame UniFy, and UniFy will just close its doors. Those who are truly responsible will escape."

"We can't let that happen," Andra said.

Just then they heard a noise. Someone was heading toward them. Obi-Wan gestured to Andra, and they quickly pressed themselves behind a gravsled.

Two surveillance droids rolled into view. Blasters were built into their hands. Their heads rotated constantly, infrared sensors glowing.

"All clear," one of them reported into a comlink. "Commence. Repeat, commence."

A loud noise suddenly pierced the air. The ground shook.

"What is it?" Andra asked, her hands against her ears.

"Let's take a look," Obi-Wan said. The droids had disappeared around the side of the malab slag hill.

Staying in the shadow of the hill, Obi-Wan and Andra followed. The droids were no longer in surveillance mode, so their heads no longer swiveled. As they followed, the noise grew louder.

When they rounded the pile of malab, another devastated landscape met their eyes. A mound of sand rose in front of them. A huge pit had been dug in the ground. The source of the noise was the golden sand being sucked into giant machines. Workers dressed in unisuits tended the operation. The droids headed toward a ring of tech domes in the distance.

Jude Watson

"There are trace minerals in the sand," Andra yelled over the noise of the machine. "They must be mining it."

The workers were intent on operating the machinery and did not turn. Andra turned on her holograph recorder and Obi-Wan his recording rod.

Another team of surveillance droids exited the first tech dome and began to make their way across the yard.

"Hurry," Obi-Wan urged. "They might switch to surveillance mode again." He lowered the recording rod and slipped it back into his tunic.

"I want to make sure the image is clear," Andra muttered.

Obi-Wan saw the infrared sensors click on. "Stop recording!" he whispered. "They might pick it up on a sensor."

"Just one more second . . ." Andra switched off the holographic recorder just as the droids' sensors began to blink.

"Don't move," Obi-Wan muttered between his teeth.

The droids' heads slowly revolved as the sensors took in every quadrant.

"This doesn't look good," Obi-Wan murmured. "Something has alerted them. We'd better get out of here."

"But we don't have enough yet!" Andra protested.

"What we have will have to do," Obi-Wan said urgently. "It will be worse if we get caught. I promised Qui-Gon we wouldn't take chances." He yanked a protesting Andra back. The droids slowly turned and headed across the yard toward them. Obi-Wan and Andra picked up their pace.

"Hurry," he urged.

Within a moment, they had ducked around the hill and were out of sight of the droids. They began to run for the cavern.

"Intruders! Intruders!"

Blaster fire suddenly ripped into the ground next to them. Obi-Wan drew his lightsaber and whirled to deflect the next blast. They were almost at the cavern entrance.

Pingpingping! The blaster fire hit the cavern wall. Chips of stone flew out, cutting Andra on the cheek.

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"Get inside!" Obi-Wan shouted.

Andra ducked inside the cavern. Deflecting one last round of fire, Obi-Wan hurried after her.

They could not move as fast inside the cavern. The floor was too slippery. When they reached the velvety darkness deep inside, Obi-Wan paused.

"I don't hear anything," he said.

"Maybe they've gone for reinforcements," Andra suggested. "Come on, the exit is close by."

Obi-Wan could hear the faint murmur of the creek as he carefully followed Andra. She made her way through the maze of turns, then stopped before the sheer wall. Obi-Wan saw her flatten herself against the wall, then slip between the fissure.

They stepped out into the creek and hopped from stone to stone. They had to hurry. No doubt a full-scale alert would send other sur-veillance teams after them.

Obi-Wan hurried behind Andra as she snaked through the tall trees of the glade. She hugged the rock wall, then emerged where they had left their swoops.

They tossed aside the branches they had used for camouflage. The swoops were gone.

They looked at each other, stunned. There was a crack of a twig behind them, and Obi-Wan spun around.

Surveillance droids surrounded them in a semicircle, blasters drawn.

Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan knew he was in danger even as he was turning. His turn was deliberately off center, his hand already reaching for his lightsaber in a motion so fast it was undetectable. With the other hand, he reached out and pushed Andra aside.

The blaster fire ripped between them and left a pockmarked wall.

Andra had quick reflexes. She hit the ground and kept rolling until she had reached safety behind an enormous fallen tree trunk.

Obi-Wan was seriously outnumbered. Qui-Gon's lessons snapped through his mind in precision order.

Keep moving.

Use reversals — surprise them.

Change hands when you can.

Come at them from above and below.

Use your ground.

The ground was uneven. The droids would have more trouble maneuvering. Obi-Wan used the fallen logs and soft moss beds to give him height and spring. He flipped backward and dispatched one droid with a blow to the head. Using the momentum of the swing, he dived at the next one's legs.

Two down.

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Andra rose, vibroblade in hand, as Obi-Wan slashed at the third droid. Andra deftly evaded blaster fire and smashed the droid from behind.

Three down.

The fourth droid swiveled to attack Andra. Obi-Wan deflected its blaster fire with his lightsaber, then kicked out at the droid who was coming at him from the right. Andra leaped and cleaved off the droid's arm. Off-balance, the droid wobbled, and Obi-Wan was able to cleanly slice it in half. It toppled.

A vine hung down from a tree overhead, and Obi-Wan, grabbing it with one hand, used it to swing himself forward to knock over the droid who was aiming at Andra. The blaster fire erupted a split second before he swiped horizontally, cutting the droid in half.

Andra gave a cry and lay still.

Obi-Wan whirled even faster now, beheading one droid and turning to knock another off its feet. He buried his lightsaber in the droid's control panel.

Obi-Wan rushed to Andra's side. He bent over her, feeling for her pulse.

Her hand came up, weakly swatting him away. "Don't worry, I'm not dead. I just had the wind knocked out of me."

Obi-Wan rocked back on his heels, relieved. "Are you sure?"

"The blaster fire hit my pack, I think." Gingerly, Andra slipped the pack off her shoulder. Blaster holes had shredded the material. She reached inside and took out the recorder. The case was pockmarked with blaster fire, and part of it looked melted.

"Oh, no!" she breathed. She accessed the playback mode, but the recorder merely buzzed and then went still.

"Don't worry," Obi-Wan said, patting his tunic. "That's why we brought a backup." His mind was already moving to the next step, as Qui-Gon had taught him. *Do not reflect on mishaps unless they have lessons to give.*

"Now we have another problem," he said. "Do you know any place nearby where we could get a fast transport?"

Jude Watson

Andra paled. "No. We'd have to hike for hours. We don't have time. Katharsis is to start in an hour. We'll never make it!"

"Let's contact Qui-Gon and see if Den was able to rig the lottery," Obi-Wan suggested. He activated the comlink. Qui-Gon answered it immediately.

"I'm glad to hear from you, Obi-Wan," he said, relief in his voice. "Did you get the evidence?"

"Not as much as we'd hoped," Obi-Wan said. "The park is definitely being developed for mining, but we have no proof that Offworld is re-sponsible."

Qui-Gon's sigh came through the comlink. "It will have to do. I don't want to put you and Andra in any more danger." "Was Den able to rig the lottery?"

"Yes," Qui-Gon answered. "He'll be one of the three citizens allowed to bet on the final game. He's tapped into the system and knows who the winner will be. Xanatos is delivering the grand prize."

There was a short pause. Obi-Wan felt disappointment thud through him. If only they could connect what they'd found to Offworld! They could expose Xanatos in front of the citizens he had hoodwinked.

Qui-Gon picked up on his thoughts. "Obi-Wan, you did your best. It's time to come back.

At least the global parks of Telos will be saved. Head back now."

Obi-Wan hesitated. If he told Qui-Gon that they had no transport, there was nothing Qui-Gon could do. He wouldn't have time to head out to get them and return in time for Katharsis. Telling him what had happened would only add needless worry.

"Soon," he answered instead. "We have one last thing to take care of."

"All right," Qui-Gon answered. "I'll see you at the dome. And be careful, both of you."

Andra winced. Obi-Wan signed off.

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"What are you thinking?" she asked. "How can we get back to Thani?"

"We have one option," Obi-Wan said grimly. "We probably have a few minutes until they miss the droids. We have to sneak back inside and steal a transport."

Andra looked nervous, but she nodded. "It's our only chance. Let's go."

They followed the route back through the cavern. They hovered inside in the shadows of the opening, carefully waiting until a surveillance team walked through. As soon as they were gone, they slipped outside and dodged the steaming pools. They crouched behind a mole miner near the malab pile.

"What now?" Andra asked.

"I have an idea," Obi-Wan told her. "When I was plowing through those memos back at UniFy, many of them dealt with Tech Dome D. They were building a landing pad there. But I don't see one, do you? It has to be concealed inside, so it wouldn't be visible to anyone in the air. Considering the size of this operation, I'd say they were planning to bring in maintenance haulers."

Andra nodded. "Good guess." "That means Offworld," Obi-Wan said. "They have a fleet of haulers. And they need other air transport for smaller jobs. If we can get into Tech Dome D, we can find evidence of Offworld and escape at the same time."

"So all we have to do is find Tech Dome D, then figure out how to get inside, record evidence, steal transport, and make it back to Thani before Katharsis is over," Andra said. "As Den would say, kill me now."

Obi-Wan grinned. "We can do it."

Keeping to the shadow of the malab hill and ducking out of sight when surveillance teams marched into view, Obi-Wan and Andra made their way to where they had glimpsed tech domes in the distance. Obi-Wan focused his macrobinoculars on each dome until he found Tech Dome D. He focused on its bay

Jude Watson

doors. Workers busily walked in and out, some pilot-ing gravsleds, some carrying durasteel bins.

When you want to leave someplace unob-served, pick the busiest spot.

"That's where we'll find transport," he told Andra.

"But the place is crawling with workers. And surveillance has been stepped up," Andra murmured. "The droids are everywhere."

"They're looking for intruders," Obi-Wan said. "Not workers."

Obi-Wan pointed to a worker exiting a small shed near them. He was fastening up his gray unisuit.

"Wait here," Obi-Wan instructed Andra.

He hugged the side of the hill of malab stone. There were only a few meters between him and the shed. He would have to chance it.

Quickly, he began to walk across the space. He gained the shelter of the door and slipped inside. A weary worker sat on a bench in front of a row of lockers. He looked up, surprised.

Obi-Wan nodded a hello. "I came for my unisuit. I'm new. Late for my shift," he added, trying to forestall any conversation.

The worker looked at him suspiciously. "The shift doesn't start for ten minutes. And you look awfully young."

Obi-Wan summoned up the Force. He directed his glance at the worker.

"But you wouldn't mind getting me a couple of suits," he said.

"Why don't I get you a couple of suits?" the worker said.

Obi-Wan took two suits from the pile the worker offered and held them up. The smaller one would fit Andra.

"See you around," he said.

"See you," the worker repeated.

Obi-Wan quickly donned the suit before exit-ing. He tucked the other under his arm and walked back to where Andra stood in the shad-ows. He handed her the unisuit and she slipped into it.

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They headed for Tech Dome D. Once they got closer, Obi-Wan saw that it was three times the size of the other domes, extending back for hundreds of meters. He and Andra headed for the big double doors and strolled inside. They walked purposefully down a long aisle stacked with supply bins.

"Here, pick this up," he directed to Andra, pointing at a durasteel bin.

"Now what?" she muttered.

"Look busy." Obi-Wan scanned the area. There were several skyhoppers parked near the spaceport door. The hangar itself was big enough to park a good-sized hauler. Offworld had to be involved here.

Obi-Wan scanned the supply bins. Apparently they stored the explosive devices here. He saw a case of thermal detonators.

"Wait a second." Obi-Wan bent down to read the side of the box. Burned into the durasteel case was a broken circle.

"Offworld," he said. "We've got them!"

Andra watched for trouble while he turned the recording rod toward the cases.

They heard a noise overhead, and the roof began to retract. For a moment, the sun blazed down, then was blocked out as a huge maintenance hauler appeared. The massive ship maneuvered through the open roof and slowly lowered onto the landing bay. A moment later, a ramp slid down and workers hurriedly began unloading mole miners.

"I think we just got all the evidence we need," Obi-Wan murmured to Andra.

"Why?" she asked.

He pointed to the side of the ship. Written in laser-pulse letters along the side was offworld.

Obi-Wan panned the letters and widened his shot to take in the unloading of the mole miners. The ramps retracted. The maintenance hauler had never cut its engines. Now it fired its repulsors and began to lift off again.

"You there! Can you give us a hand?"

Jude Watson

Two workers were busily loading supplies onto a gravsled. One of them waved a hand at Obi-Wan and Andra.

"Time to head for those skyhoppers," Obi-Wan murmured.

Obi-Wan waved back, as if he couldn't hear over the noise of the maintenance hauler's departure. Then he and Andra headed off in the other direction.

"Don't hurry," he told Andra, whose pace kept quickening, showing her anxiety.

They strolled to the skyhoppers. They had just reached them when the alarm sounded.

"Intruders," a voice intoned. "Intruders."

"Okay, now hurry," Obi-Wan said.

He leaped inside and Andra followed. He settled himself behind the controls as the roof began to close overhead. Obi-Wan fired up the engines. The craft rose in the air. The doors above continued to close, the opening narrowing. Obi-Wan pushed the engines to full power.

"We can't make it!" Andra screamed.

Obi-Wan yanked the controls so that the sky-hopper flew sideways. He aimed for the small opening and cleared it by a centimeter on either side.

"Are we through?" Andra asked, her eyes closed. Sweat beaded her forehead, and her hands clutched the seat.

"We're through," Obi-Wan answered. He wiped the sweat off his own forehead with his sleeve. "Next stop, Thani."

Chapter Fourteen

Qui-Gon paced impatiently near the central ring of the dome. He was careful to keep his hood forward to conceal his face. The mid-game break was taking place, and much of the crowd had headed for the food stalls, but he couldn't take a chance of being spotted. His picture was on every information kiosk in Thani.

Obi-Wan and Andra should have been back by now. What if something had happened to Obi-Wan? This was the second time the boy had been in great danger. Again, Qui-Gon had allowed it to happen.

"Settle down, Qui-Gon," Den said. "You're making me nervous." But Qui-Gon noted that Den's face was taut with nerves, and he continually scanned the aisles around them.

"You're worried about Andra, too," Qui-Gon said.

"Who, me?" Den said, turning away. "I don't worry about other people. Only myself. I'm the one who's about to bet his life savings."

Once Den had rigged the results so that he could win the lottery, he had to come up with the resources to make a credible bet. Den had added all the credits he had to one of the many easy loans available on Telos. If he lost, he would be liable for a heavy debt.

Jude Watson

"Are you certain you interpreted the game correctly?" Qui-Gon asked. "You're sure you know who will win?"

"I'll get my legs broken if I'm wrong," Den said. "It's Kama Elias. Relax."

"Remember, after you win, I'll be right here," Qui-Gon advised him. "Don't even entertain the possibility of taking off with that prize. That money is going straight back into the treasury of Telos."

"Of course it is," Den said. "Kill me now if you think I'd double-cross my friends."

"Don't tempt me," Qui-Gon said dryly.

The dais in the central ring began to rise, signaling the start of the next round of games. Qui-Gon and Den took their seats. Qui-Gon kept an eye out for Obi-Wan. After the lottery winners bet on the final contest, Xanatos would present the prize. Then scenes of what Katharsis funded would flash on the giant screens. Instead of images of pristine beauty, the crowd would see scenes of devastation. But only if Obi-Wan re-turned in time.

The second round of games began. The battered contestants now played a round of shock ball. Roars from the crowd encouraged the most savage play.

Qui-Gon's worry intensified. Where was Obi-Wan?

He remembered the circumstances of their leaving the Temple. They had stood together on the landing platform, ready to take a shuttle to the spaceliner port. They had already said good-bye to their friends, to Tahl and Bant and Garen. They had said good-bye to a disapproving Yoda.

"It is not too late, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon had said. "There will be no shame if you remain here. It will not interfere with what happens with us later. I promise you that. It is better for you if you stay."

He remembered the clear resolution in Obi-Wan's gaze. "I can't say that you need me, Qui-Gon. I know you can do this on your own. But I will help."

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Now Qui-Gon admonished himself. He had thought then that he could not prevent Obi-Wan from coming. He had taken the resolution in the boy's gaze to mean that even if he insisted, Obi-Wan would not walk back into the Temple and remain.

But was that true? Was his own quiet gratitude what had been most important at that mo-ment? Again, it was his own emotion that had swayed him. Should he have taken a firm stance and insisted Obi-Wan remain? Had he been selfish?

Qui-Gon nearly groaned aloud. Obi-Wan was not officially his Padawan again, yet he kept coming up against the many ways he could fail him. He had been reluctant to shoulder the responsibility of a new Padawan in the first place. Then he had come to accept it. Soon he had taken pleasure from that responsibility. And now he was at sea with it. Adrift with his feel-ings, wanting to do the right thing and not quite sure how. All too aware of his own failings, all too aware of what could go wrong.

Yet Obi-Wan was so sure. The boy still had things to teach him about certainty. About trust.

If only he would show up.

Qui-Gon caught a glimpse of a familiar form moving quickly through the crowd. Obi-Wan! Andra hurried by his side, taking quick steps to keep up with Obi-Wan's stride. He knew with a glance at Obi-Wan's face that his mission had been successful.

Obi-Wan and Andra slipped past a row of protesting onlookers to reach Den and Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan handed the recording rod to Qui-Gon.

"We got it all," he said.

Qui-Gon immediately rose and hurried off. He had already discovered the booth where the technician who transmitted the visual images to the crowd during the breaks was located.

The technician sat at a console, eating a greasy meat pie. Around him were tiny screens that showed what was currently playing to the crowd. One camera was on each contestant, one took in a full view, several took partial views, and the rest

Jude Watson

scanned the faces in the crowd. During the break, all of these would be replaced with the global park images.

The technician looked up. "Who're you?"

Qui-Gon placed the recording rod on the console. "These images are to be shown after Xanatos' speech. Governor's orders."

The technician licked a drop of sauce off his thumb. "I didn't hear anything about this."

Qui-Gon directed his gaze at the man, who continued to eat. "You should show the images after the speech."

"I'll show them after the speech," the technician said, his mouth full.

Qui-Gon eyed his greasy fingers. "And you'll clean your hands first."

"I'll clean my hands first," the technician said, as if he'd just thought of it.

Qui-Gon waited until the technician tossed his food away and carefully wiped his fingers. Then he watched him load the new visuals. When he was sure the man would follow through on the plan, he left.

The last game had ended. Only four contestants remained.

The governor announced the names of the lottery winners. A mixture of groans and cheers erupted from the crowd. When he announced Den's name, Den shot to his feet, yodeling wildly.

He turned back to them, his eyes alight.

"Ready?"

Andra's gaze was steady. "Do not fail us, Den."

Den leaned over. "You've got to trust some-body sometime, Captain Integrity," he said softly.

"I know," Andra said. "But why does it have to be you?"

Then she smiled at him, a smile filled with trust. She briefly touched his cheek.

A slow, delighted smile spread over Den's boyish features. Still grinning, he strode off to join the other lottery winners onstage. Andra clasped her hands together.

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"I trust him, too," Qui-Gon told her.

Obi-Wan shot him a look that asked, *How can you be sure?*

Qui-Gon wanted to tell him that sometimes he found it easier to read strangers than those close to him. When his heart wasn't involved, his instincts told him who could fail him, who would be true. He hoped that after this mission, he and Obi-Wan would have time to talk.

Obi-Wan leaned closer to him. "Are you certain about this?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "Yes, I am. But I also have swoops ready in case he takes off. Over the years, I've learned to back up my instincts."

The lottery contestants stood at small consoles. They wagered enormous sums on the final outcome. Den made a show of indecisive agony before placing his bet. Andra sighed.

"He can't resist a chance to show off," she said, her hands twisting nervously.

The final round began. It was a short replay of each of the games that had been played throughout the contest. By now the contestants were covered with sweat, grime, and blood. Each of the lottery winners sat on a dais, watching the action, knowing that their life savings depended on the outcome. This was the time that the crowd kept up one continuous roar.

The game of shock ball ended the match. Kama Elias suddenly zoomed past his opponent, who turned too sharply and spiraled out of control, taking a bad fall. Kama scored. The buzzer sounded. The games were over.

Den leaped off the dais and did a frenzied dance in the middle of the arena. The crowd loved it, screaming his name. The screens flashed DEN DEN DEN!!!!

Then the platform slowly rose from the center ring, and Xanatos stood, a commanding figure in black. He raised his arms to the crowd and the chant changed to his name. Thousands of feet pounded against the floor until the entire dome shuddered. XAN-A-TOS! XAN-A-TOS! XAN-A-TOS!

Jude Watson

He raised a hand for quiet. Slowly, the cheers subsided. Then, his hypnotic voice boomed over the dome.

"Katharsis saves us!"

"YES!" the crowd responded.

"Katharsis enriches us!"

"YES!"

"Katharsis protects our sacred spaces!"

"YES!"

Qui-Gon looked up at the screens. *Do it now*, he urged the technician.

The scenes of the frenzied crowd disappeared. An image of the Sacred Pools took its place. But instead of the glittering crystal water, a foamy black pool appeared. Steam rose from the surface.

At first, the crowd didn't notice. Then another image flashed, and another. The hill of malab slabs. Mole miners. The scan grid lying near shattered stone. Giant machines sucking golden sand. Gravsleds parked on a once-pristine landscape.

Murmurs began. Xanatos did not notice them. His eyes were on the crowd, not the giant screens.

"Thanks to Katharsis, our beloved Telos is now ensured protection for generations," he said. "The people have spoken. They have safeguarded their legacy."

An image of the Offworld logo filled the screen. It was burned into a case of thermal detonators.

The murmurs of the restless crowd turned to a buzz of conversation that filled the dome like a room full of tech equipment gone haywire.

The next image was of mole miners being unloaded from the maintenance hauler. An image filled the screen: offworld.

The buzz turned into a roar of disbelief and anger.

Xanatos looked up at the screens at last. Qui-Gon watched him. Anyone else would have shown his surprise and anger. Xanatos just went still.

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Shouting erupted around the dome. Many rose to their feet. The shouts rose in intensity. People began to stand on their chairs and raise their fists. A rhythmic pounding began, a demand more potent than a shouted question.

Xanatos raised his hands, motioning for silence. It took several moments for the crowd to quiet down.

"Why do you believe what you see?" he asked in a quiet, commanding tone. "Believe what I tell you. Someone is trying to inflame you. Someone is trying to trick you."

A lone voice arose from the crowd. "Is it you?"

The crowd took up the question. "IS IT YOU? IS IT YOU?"

"We demand an answer!" someone else shouted.

"I am answering your doubts!" Xanatos thundered. "I am telling you that there is trickery afoot here! And I invite anyone in the crowd to come with me to the Sacred Pools and examine what is there. I trust my government. I trust the UniFy corporation. Governor, will you allow the Sacred Pools to be opened to the public to see for themselves?"

A silver-haired man rose from the front row of the dome. "I will."

Xanatos spread his hands. "You see? There is no deviousness here. There is only openness. We will prevail if we do not fall for tricks."

The crowd began to quiet. Trust was winning out over anger.

"Now let me bring those who have lied to our beloved world to justice!" Xanatos shouted, and the crowd roared its approval.

Xanatos stepped away from the platform for a moment. Qui-Gon saw him speak rapidly to one of the security police ringing the arena. He saw one of them speak into a comlink.

Dread filled Qui-Gon. "Put your hood up, Obi-Wan," he said quickly.

Moments later, the faces of Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan flashed onscreen.

"Have you seen these men?" Xanatos boomed. He pointed to the screens. "They are enemies of Telos! Condemned to death,

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they escaped and now continue to work their evil! They are here, in this arena. They are the ones who switched the image tapes. Look at your neighbors. Do you see them? They are the ones who tricked you!"

"Uh-oh," Andra breathed. She leaned forward, shielding Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon by pre-tending to search the crowd around her.

But it was no use. A Telosian in front of them turned and peered beneath their hoods. Surprise and recognition made his mouth drop. Then, he stood and screamed out, "Here! Here they are!"

There was no chance to move, and nowhere to go. Security police poured down the aisles and Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were caught.

Chapter Fifteen

The security police dragged Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon into the aisle. They surrounded them with blasters drawn. Two of them held Qui-Gon by the arms, two more held Obi-Wan.

"Hey!" Den shouted from the stage. "Enough of this. I won! Where's my prize?"

The crowd took up the cry. This is what they waited for — to see the winner accept a fortune in credits and crystalline vertex. Even the security police wanted to see it. Although their blasters stayed leveled at the Jedi, their eyes darted to the stage.

Xanatos hurriedly strode forward, a transparent box in his hands. Crystals glittered inside and credits spilled from the top. Xanatos seemed visibly anxious to get the ceremony over with, Obi-Wan noted.

Xanatos handed the box to Den. Everyone turned toward him. It was customary for the winner to say a few words.

Den stood, looking at the box. He did not speak.

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon. This was the test. Things had changed. They were in custody. Den could see that. Andra could not stop him alone. If Den didn't follow through on their plan, he could keep a fortune. The amount in the box would tempt almost any being, let alone a thief.

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Instead of addressing the crowd, Den turned and spoke to the tall, silver-haired man in the first tier of seats. "Governor?"

The Governor of Telos stood.

"Will you read the durasheet I handed you before the final contest took place?"

The Governor reached into the pocket of his tunic. He leaned over and read into the amplification device. "The winner will be Kama Elias by twenty points. Deleta will experience a steering problem. Kama will push past to win."

The crowd looked on, mystified. Kama had won by twenty points. But how did the winner know that Deleta would have a steering problem?

"Citizens of Telos, I wrote that before the games began," Den announced. "I broke into the Katharsis computer. Every Katharsis contest is rigged! The equipment of the contestants is subtly altered as the games go on so that the prechosen winner will triumph. Even the winner of the lottery is chosen ahead of time. The winner must agree to split the fortune with UniFy. This whole thing is a setup designed to get your money!"

Den reached into the box and withdrew fistfuls of credits and crystalline vertex. He tossed them to the crowd. The credits and vertex rained down, and people scrambled to pick them up. Around them the screens flashed im-ages of the devastated Sacred Pools.

"They've lied to us!" he shouted. "Look at the screens! *This* is what your money has bought! Look around you—look at each other. Are you in debt? Do you only think about money? Good—because that's what they want! And while we scheme and dream, our world is being destroyed. Look at the logo on those crates of explosives, on that ship. UniFy is Offworld! Our planet has been sold to the biggest mining corporation in the galaxy while we bet on a *game*. And who runs Offworld? The mighty Xanatos!"

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For a moment, the collective silence of the crowd seemed to suck all the air out of the dome. Then the silence broke into a great roar, as mighty as the sea.

The security police holding Obi-Wan were just as transfixed as the crowd. The crowd rose as one body, leaping to its feet and screaming for Xanatos. The screen still flashed image after image of the ravaged park.

"Arrest him!" they shouted. "Arrest Xanatos!"

Xanatos stepped forward once again. He waited out the shouts and jeers. Slowly, people in the crowd began to hush one another. Everyone expected Xanatos to calm them again. To tell them that what Den was saying was a lie.

Xanatos surveyed the crowd for a long moment, waiting out every murmur until the dome was silent once more.

Then, he smiled and shook his head like a teacher admonishing a class of students. "You pathetic fools."

Moving astonishingly fast, his cloak streaming behind him, he leaped onto the winner's swoop. He rose into the air, pushing the swoop to maximum speed. Weaving to avoid the float-ing boxes, he expertly maneuvered the craft out of the dome toward the exit.

"Not this time, Xanatos," Qui-Gon said grimly.

It was easy to break the holds of the distracted guards. Obi-Wan struck out with his elbow and knee, freeing himself. Afraid to fire their blasters in the midst of the weaving, angered

Qui-Gon had hidden their swoops behind a stack of benches. They leaped on them and took off in the direction Xanatos had gone.

Chapter Sixteen

By the time they roared out of the dome, the boulevard seemed completely empty. Qui-Gon closed his eyes for a moment and focused. When he opened them again, he caught the flicker of movement down the street to his right. Perhaps it was just a shadow. But the Force told him it was Xanatos.

Qui-Gon pushed his engines as high as they would go. He could hear Obi-Wan directly behind him. The boy would keep up. He knew that.

Determination tightened every muscle. He would not lose Xanatos now. No doubt he was heading somewhere he would be safe, or perhaps toward transport off-planet. Xanatos always had an escape route.

But they had taken him by surprise. Perhaps there were details left to arrange. Xanatos could not have prepared for this.

To Qui-Gon's surprise, Xanatos headed out of the city and took off over open country.

"I think he's heading to the Sacred Pools," Obi-Wan shouted. "This is the way we went."

"We'll have to stay behind him," Qui-Gon answered. "He knows we're following him. If we can't catch him, we can keep him in sight."

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The swoop engines could only be pushed so far. Xanatos had a faster craft, since the ones used for the games had modified engines. The Jedi could barely manage to keep him in sight, and there were stretches where they lost him completely.

Over the course of the ride, Obi-Wan never lost his focus. He settled in over the handlebars, his eyes trained on the speck in the distance that was Xanatos. Qui-Gon's face was set in determined lines.

At last they reached the road to the park. They roared down it, heading for the entrance. The gate was formed from electrowire. Sensors were aimed above to blast any vehicles flying over it.

A swoop lay abandoned on the road. Xanatos was nowhere in sight.

Qui-Gon pulled his swoop over. He examined the swoop on the ground. It was out of fuel.

"He must be in the park," he said. He eyed the gate.

"I have another way in," Obi-Wan assured him.

Obi-Wan led the way back down the road through the trees. He left his swoop and splashed through the creek toward the fissure in the cavern wall. He pressed himself inside.

Qui-Gon followed with difficulty. He was a big man, and it was a small crack. Somehow he was able to push himself through.

They quickly made their way to the entrance of the cavern and burst out into the open air. Xanatos was crossing the yard, heading for Tech Dome D.

"There's a landing pad inside," Obi-Wan told Qui-Gon. "No doubt he has transport off-planet waiting there."

Qui-Gon began to run. Xanatos must never reach the Tech Dome.

He moved silently, his feet not making even a whisper of sound on the soft ground. But before he could reach Xanatos, his opponent suddenly leaped on a gravsled and took off.

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Qui-Gon grabbed an abandoned gravsled and followed, knowing Obi-Wan would be only moments behind him. He maneuvered around a pile of equipment and managed to cut Xanatos off from the tech dome. With a snarl, Xanatos wheeled the gravsled, making a sharp right and zooming off. Qui-Gon was on his tail.

Ahead lay a ravaged landscape. The lowering sun painted it with bloodred rays. Steaming pools of black acid bubbled and sent vapor into the air. The area was lumpy with hardened lava and sticky with tar. The air seemed thick and yellow with chemicals. Occasionally a large burst of steam erupted from fissures in the rock.

Xanatos flew off the gravsled. He landed on his feet, lightsaber in hand, perfectly positioned to attack. Taken off guard, Qui-Gon turned the gravsled too rapidly. He felt the vehicle was close to overturning and he jumped off.

The leap was awkward, but it saved him. He felt Xanatos' lightsaber buzz near his ear as it came down and struck rock.

Qui-Gon landed off balance and on one knee, but his lightsaber was activated and in his hand, ready to ward off the next blow. The tubes of light met and tangled, buzzing and sending a charge into the air.

"You won't kill me, Qui-Gon," Xanatos said, their faces close. His blue eyes burned with hatred.

"I am not here to kill you," Qui-Gon said. "I am here to bring you to justice." He somersaulted backward and reversed direction, hop-ing to knock the lightsaber from his opponent's hand.

The blow came down, but Xanatos met it and twisted away.

"Tell the truth for once, Qui-Gon," he sneered. "You spend so much time mouthing those Jedi pieces of wisdom that you've lost touch with your honesty, if you ever had it at all. You won't be satisfied until I'm dead. Look, here comes your young puppet."

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Qui-Gon saw the blue glow of Obi-Wan's lightsaber as the boy rushed toward them. He sensed Obi-Wan would move to the right. If they flanked Xanatos, perhaps they could disarm him.

They moved at the same split second without exchanging a glance. Qui-Gon knew when and how Obi-Wan would strike, with a downward blow at the hilt of the lightsaber. Qui-Gon dropped to one knee for an upward strike. It would be difficult for Xanatos to counter both blows.

But Xanatos had anticipated their moves. He whirled away from Obi-Wan's blow and leaped backward, using the Force to add distance to the jump. Qui-Gon struck upward but only dealt a glancing blow to Xanatos' lightsaber. A fissure exploded near him, the steam hissing up-ward in a powerful column. He had to leap aside to avoid being scalded.

The steam column separated the Jedi from Xanatos, who smiled.

"Here we go again," Xanatos said. "The noble Jedi try to pretend they only come for justice when actually they come for blood. Remember, Obi-Wan? You took off after a thirteen-year-old boy and then he turned up dead. Do you remember the look in Bruck's eyes when you killed him? Are you trying to tell your-self that you're sorry your rival is dead? Admit the feeling in your heart. Admit your gladness! Admit your thirst for revenge."

Qui-Gon saw the distress in Obi-Wan's face. The hand holding the lightsaber trembled.

"Don't listen," he said quietly. "Don't listen, Obi-Wan."

The steam was sucked back into the fissure. At the same moment, Xanatos leaped forward. Still shaken, Obi-Wan was caught off guard. He barely was able to parry Xanatos' blow with his lightsaber. Xanatos whirled, one leg kicking out, sending Obi-Wan flying backward.

Then Xanatos leaped after the fallen boy.

Chapter Seventeen

"No!" Qui-Gon cried. He reached out to the rocks and vegetation that surrounded him, for the current that connected him to all things, that connected him to Obi-Wan.

He hit Xanatos in midair. Their bodies connected like mountains of hard rock. There was no give to Xanatos' muscles, no yielding in Qui-Gon. The clash was titanic. Qui-Gon felt the shock of it move through his bones. For a moment, Xanatos gripped Qui-Gon's arm, forcing them to remain entangled.

"You brought me to this," he said, his midnight eyes burning.

They landed inches apart, lightsabers already engaged. The lava was slippery and Qui-Gon had to avoid the fissures of steam. He saw Obi-Wan beginning to struggle to his feet.

"So the pupil has learned from the teacher," Xanatos went on relentlessly. "Lie about your feelings while you talk of Jedi honor. Leave murder in your wake."

"You are responsible for Bruck's death," Qui-Gon told him as they fought. "Not Obi-Wan. You corrupted the boy, exposed him to the dark side. He followed you blindly."

Obi-Wan limped slightly as he headed toward them. He had turned his ankle. His face still looked naked and young, still stung by what Xanatos had flung at him.

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Qui-Gon thought that Obi-Wan had come to terms with what had happened. He had regretted and mourned Bruck's death, for even though Bruck had done evil, there was still hope for him while he was alive. Obi-Wan had not seemed to blame himself.

Yet somewhere inside, he had. A life had been ended. That was a loss not easily absorbed. Qui-Gon knew that well. And Xanatos would see that hesitancy in Obi-Wan, and would use it to taunt him. He would see weak-ness where Qui-Gon saw strength. Such was the nature of evil.

Courage, Obi-Wan. Grab your conviction. Know what you know. Do not let him reach you.

"I see my words have touched you, Obi-Wan," Xanatos said in the silky, insinuating tone he used to manipulate those around him. "Can it be because I'm right?"

"No, Xanatos," Obi-Wan said. "I grieve for a life lost. And I thank all who taught me for my grief. It does not make me weak. It makes me strong."

Suddenly, Obi-Wan's lightsaber whirled. Qui-Gon was astonished at how quickly and gracefully the boy moved, leaping off a mound of lava to strike at Xanatos. Xanatos stumbled backward from the ferocity of the attack. A cloud of steam suddenly erupted, and he quickly lurched to one side, losing his balance and landing on one hand.

"Stronger than you," Obi-Wan added fiercely, leaping after him.

Qui-Gon followed, admiring Obi-Wan's focus. Now the two fought as one. Xanatos had weakened, and they used this to drive him back, back against the black pool. If they could get his back against it, they would be able to disarm him or defeat him. It would be his choice.

Two swoops suddenly appeared from behind the pool. Andra and Den had found them. They landed and ran to help, their blasters at the ready.

"You will pay, Xanatos!" Andra shouted. "We will take you back to Thani for trial!"

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Xanatos stood at the edge of the water behind him. He had no hope of escape. He was surrounded, and there was nowhere to run to. His gaze traveled from Den to Andra to Obi-Wan, finally resting on Qui-Gon. The depths of his hatred turned his gaze as black and foul as the steaming pool.

"You will never have the satisfaction of killing me, Qui-Gon Jinn," he said softly. "And I will never submit to anyone's laws. Your hate drove you, though you won't admit it. You destroyed me because you could not save me. I am your biggest failure. Live with that. And live with this.

"No!" Qui-Gon cried, starting forward.

But he was too late. With a cruel smile that stretched his lips over his teeth like an animal, Xanatos took two quick steps backward and leaped into the boiling black pool. Andra cried out as he disappeared.

"He can't survive," she whispered. "The acid will strip the flesh off his bones."

Obi-Wan shuddered. He had seen what the pool could do. Xanatos was pure evil. But he was a living being, and he had gone to a horrible fate. Qui-Gon seemed frozen, staring at the murky, stinking pool.

Slowly, something stirred in the water, spiraling upward. It was a black cape. As they watched, it disintegrated before their eyes.

Xanatos was dead at last.

Chapter Eighteen

Den stretched his arms over his head and smiled. "Whoever would have thought that a thief and a dinko would be the grand heroes of Telos?"

Andra threw a pillow at him. "I'm glad all the attention hasn't gone to your head."

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon smiled, used to Den and Andra's squabbling by now. They knew a deep affection was growing between the two.

Their return to Telos had brought everything Andra had wanted for so long. UniFy had been exposed as a front for Offworld. Their treacherous activities had come to light. The government had apologized to the people, then called for special elections. Investigations had begun into payoffs to various government heads. The governor who had turned a blind eye had re-signed. The treasurer, Vox Chun, was in jail.

And Katharsis had been stopped. The citizens of Telos were horrified that they had been hoodwinked by greed. Mass delirium had taken over, they claimed. Scores of citizens had contacted Andra, hoping to join the POWER party. A new patriotism had flared on Telos, one based on commitment and stewardship of the land they cherished and had almost lost forever.

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"So what kind of governor do you think I'd make?" Den asked. "The people love me."

"That's because they don't know you like we do," Andra said with a grin. "You're no politician, Den."

"Hey, you yourself said I was good at lying," Den protested, pretending to be hurt.

"There will be no more lying by a government on Telos, ever again," Andra said seriously.

"I'd take that bet, but I don't like the odds," Den added more cynically.

Qui-Gon rose. "I wish you both luck. And we thank you for helping to clear up those charges."

"You're free to go, but must you?" Andra asked. "We'd love you to stay for a few days. Let me show you the beauties of Telos. The Sacred Pools will take time to clean up, but there are other places."

"Some other time. We must return to the Temple."

Obi-Wan rose and thanked Andra and Den. He was sorry to say good-bye. He admired Andra's commitment. He had been suspicious of Den, but he had come to appreciate him, too. He knew that in their different ways, they would work to restore Telos to the busy, peaceful, blooming world it had been.

"I know we're leaving Telos in good hands," Obi-Wan told them. He grinned at Den. "I'd say the odds are definitely in your favor."

Obi-Wan walked with Qui-Gon down the wide boulevard toward the spaceliner that would take them back to Coruscant.

"Was Xanatos your biggest failure?" he asked tentatively. "Will his death haunt you, as he hoped?"

"Does Bruck's death haunt you?" Qui-Gon asked softly.

"No," Obi-Wan said slowly. "But I carry it here." He touched his chest.

"It is the same for me, I think," Qui-Gon said. "It will not haunt me — not the way Xanatos hoped it would. Xanatos chose

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death. It was his nature to choose the dark path. But it will take some time for me to feel peace about it. I cannot help feeling that if I'd been a better Master, he wouldn't have turned to the Dark Side. Yoda would tell me that as a Master, I cannot make a Padawan a success or a failure. I can only guide."

And me? Obi-Wan wanted to ask. How do you see me, Qui-Gon—success, or failure?

Qui-Gon didn't speak for a few minutes. He seemed to devote himself to enjoying the beauty of the day, as though he needed it to chase away sorrow.

"You are just beginning your journey, Obi-Wan," he said at last. "Do not concern yourself with success or failure. If you act rightly, those words lose their meaning. There is only the good that you do."

"It's hard not to think of failure, considering I've been put on probation," Obi-Wan said.

"That has nothing to do with failure," Qui-Gon said gently. "You must not think it does. The Jedi path is a difficult one to walk. The Council knows this. If someone strays, especially at a young age, they understand. But still they must be certain of your commitment. You will have to meet with them, spend time at the Temple renewing your dedication. It will be a good thing for both of us, I think. There is a time for missions. And then there is a time for meditation and study."

"You will be at the Temple too?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon nodded. "It is time for reflection for me as well. And I will help you with the Council. They must understand why you made the decision to leave. I have come to understand it."

"You have?"

"I was slow to do so, I admit," Qui-Gon said. "But yes, I have." He paused. "I know you are on probation and can't be my official apprentice. But you are my Padawan, Obi-Wan. I do not need the Council to tell me so."

Obi-Wan took a deep breath. "Then you'll take me back?"

"We will take each other back," Qui-Gon said.

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Obi-Wan had hoped for this. He had tried to control his impatience for it. Now here it was, and he found he had no words. He was too deeply moved to form them.

"I fought our bond from the first," Qui-Gon said. "But you knew something I didn't. You knew that some things are meant to be. Now I know it, too. You will make a fine Jedi Knight. I would be proud to continue the journey we started together."

Obi-Wan lifted his head. Now he, too, saw the beauty of the day. The sky was dazzlingly clear. For the first time in what felt like a long while, the future was clear as well.

"I am not saying the way will be easy," Qui-Gon added. "We have different temperaments. No doubt we will clash. You will come to challenge me again."

"I will try not to," Obi-Wan told him earnestly.

"You don't understand, Padawan." Qui-Gon gave the smile he gave so rarely, a full smile that lit up his blue eyes and caused them to sparkle with warmth. "I look forward to it."

Book Nine
The Fight for Truth

Chapter One

The darkness was total. Not even a hint of light penetrated the hood. Sound was muffled. Obi-Wan Kenobi balanced on his feet, kept his lightsaber in a defensive position, and concentrated. Without sight or clear sound, he had to rely completely on the Force.

He moved to the left, whirled, and struck with his lightsaber. It slashed through empty air. Yet he knew he'd been close.

Off to his right, he heard a buzzing sound, and the clatter of metal hitting the floor.

"Point, Siri," Obi-Wan's Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, said quietly.

Obi-Wan felt a trickle of sweat move down his neck. The hood was hot from his warm breath. He gripped his lightsaber harder. His opponent in this training exercise was Siri, another Jedi apprentice. She had already destroyed two seeker droids. He hadn't felled one.

"Remember your purpose, Obi-Wan."

He heard Qui-Gon's steady counsel. Even though Qui-Gon couldn't see his Padawan's face, he knew that Obi-Wan had lost his focus. The purpose of the exercise, Obi-Wan knew, was cooperation. It did not matter how many seeker droids he destroyed or how many were taken down by Siri. They would be judged on how they worked together. They would have to read

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each other's intentions through movement, instinct, and the Force. They would have to be generous, reaching out to each other to reveal their intentions.

But how could he reach out to someone who fought only for herself?

Siri focused on the enemy and ignored Obi-Wan. A skilled, graceful fighter, she was single-minded in her purpose. Every particle of her being was focused on victory. It made her one of the best lightsaber fighters in the Temple. Even though she was eleven - two years younger than Obi-Wan - she had fought in his classes.

Faintly, he heard Siri's soft footsteps behind him, and heard her foot slide as she lunged. Another buzz, another clatter of metal.

"Good footwork, Siri," Adi Gallia called.

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth. Adi had only recently taken Siri as her Padawan. She had chosen Siri because of the girl's extraordinary promise. Now Siri was proving her value, showing up a more experienced Padawan - Obi-Wan.

Frustration and irritation surged inside him, driving out his connection to the Force. Obi-Wan listened intently for the slight stir in the air that the seeker droid caused. He heard the sound, whirled to his left, and collided with Siri.

"Opposite corners," Adi rapped out. "Begin again."

Obi-Wan moved back to his corner. He rubbed his palm along his tunic. His hands were perspiring, and his lightsaber almost slipped. Dropping it while fighting alongside Siri would be humiliating.

He wished he had Qui-Gon's patience. He still had so much to learn. Try as he might, he could not penetrate Siri's devotion to the exercise. It was *her* battle, *her* challenge. There was no room for him.

They started forward again. Obi-Wan moved slowly, reaching out to the Force to tell him where the seeker droids were flying. He heard another *clang* as a seeker droid hit the floor.

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"Trust your partner as well as the Force," Adi called. "Aggression and competitiveness have no place in this exercise."

Obi-Wan felt Siri move slightly nearer to him.

Yet he still felt nothing from her. Another seeker droid hit the floor, and Obi-Wan's irritation crested and drove out his caution. He reached out, ignoring Siri.

Buzz, clang! A seeker droid hit the floor as he dropped to one knee and made a horizontal sweep. He rolled to his left, then swung upward. *Clang!* Another droid hit the floor. Why should he wait for Siri's cooperation while she destroyed all the droids herself? He would look like a fool.

Obi-Wan twisted, lunged, and attacked again. He heard Siri's breathing and the whisper of her quick footwork as she did the same. Within minutes, the two of them had destroyed every seeker droid in the room.

Obi-Wan felt a glow of satisfaction as he removed his hood. They had defeated their opponents in record time. Siri threw back her hood and pushed her golden hair behind her ears. Her vivid blue eyes blazed with satisfaction. They bowed to each other, then turned to face their Masters.

"You have both failed the exercise," Qui-Gon said sternly.

Adi rose, her garments rustling. Her tall stature and air of command made her an intimidating figure. She drew Siri aside and began to speak to her in a low tone. Qui-Gon tossed a towel to Obi-Wan so that he could wipe the perspiration off his forehead.

"I know you can fight," Qui-Gon told him. "You've proven yourself in battle after battle. That was not the point of the exercise, Padawan."

"I know," Obi-Wan admitted. "But she -"

Qui-Gon didn't wait for him to finish. "Siri has her own strengths and weaknesses. That was for you to discover. You merge with the strength, cover the weakness. Together, the two of you are stronger."

Jude Watson

"Siri did no better than I did," Obi-Wan said. He knew he sounded sulky, but he couldn't help himself. It was Siri who had changed the rules of the exercise.

"Siri is not my Padawan," Qui-Gon said sternly. "We are speaking of you. Remember, Obi-Wan, the fear of looking like a fool is never a reason to do something. Or not do it. It is a fear born in weakness."

Obi-Wan nodded. He knew better than to continue to challenge Qui-Gon. At least they would soon be leaving. He would not have to repeat the exercise with Siri. Yoda had informed them that he was sending them on a mission.

Just then Yoda entered the training room. He tucked his hands inside his robe, waiting for them to face him.

"A summons we have received," he said. "Parents have contacted the Jedi. Think they do that their child might be Force-sensitive. Kegan, the planet is. Are you familiar with this world?"

He asked the question of Qui-Gon and Adi. Both Jedi Masters shook their heads. Obi-Wan was surprised. Between the two, they had travelled an extensive amount.

"Remote Kegan is," Yoda said. "A one-planet system orbiting one sun. It is an Outer Rim planet, cut off from the galaxy. Trade agreements, they do not have. Travel to other worlds, they do not do. Outsiders, they do not welcome. No one has landed on the planet in thirty years."

"That is very unusual," Qui-Gon observed.

Yoda blinked. He had lived long and seen much. There was not much that could surprise him.

"A good sign this request may be," he said. "Think we do that by taking this step Kegan means to open up relations with the Inner Core worlds. Welcomes this, the Galactic Senate does. Relations between worlds fosters peace. So two parts, your mission has. Open relations with Kegan we must. Determine the child's potential we must as well. A planet that isolates itself can be filled with suspicion and fear. Diplomatic you must be. Disruption you must not allow."

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Yoda looked at Adi and Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan was confused. Was he sending the two Jedi Masters instead of a Master-Padawan team?

"Two teams we have decided to send," Yoda said.

"You mean all of us?" Obi-Wan blurted in dismay.

Yoda ignored his tone. "Cooperate you must to complete the mission."

Cooperate with Siri? Obi-Wan wanted to cry. He'd need more than the Force to accomplish that!

Chapter Two

Why two teams? Obi-Wan wondered as Adi piloted their craft toward the surface of Kegan. The mission to identify a Force-sensitive child was fairly routine.

Did it mean that the Council was still looking over his shoulder?

After he had left the Jedi for a short time, Obi-Wan had been put on probation. He had used the time to deepen his study of the Jedi path. The probation had been lifted, and he was once again an official Padawan learner. But did the Council still withhold their trust?

Over the past months, the process of repairing his ties with his Master had been satisfying for both of them. They had spent much time at the Temple, and also had roamed the galaxy together, observing other worlds and customs and helping when they could. Their bond had grown stronger.

Had the Council not seen this? Why were they paired with Adi and Siri?

"Landing in three minutes," Adi announced, breaking into his thoughts.

Obi-Wan stole a glance at Siri. Her face was passive as she gazed over the countryside below. She looked completely calm, but perhaps she hid nervousness well. Obi-Wan remembered

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how anxious he'd felt before his first mission. It was a new experience to leave the Temple and be thrust into the sometimes rough and violent galaxy. Obi-Wan leaned closer.

"Landing on a planet for the first time can be confusing," he told her. "There's usually so much to see that it's hard to focus. But in the first few minutes you can learn many things."

She didn't turn, but kept her eyes on the approaching landing platform. "I never lose my focus, Obi-Wan. Or my commitment."

The words felt like a slap. Obi-Wan leaned back again, his face flushed. Siri had been furious with him for leaving the Jedi path. She had accused him of undermining the commitment of all Padawans by his decision. She implied that her commitment to the Jedi was stronger than his.

It wasn't fair. He had taken one misstep. His Master and the Council had forgiven him. Why couldn't she?

The craft slowly lowered onto the landing platform. Obi-Wan saw a group waiting for them. Both the men and women wore tunics similar to the Jedis'.

Adi activated the ramp, and they disembarked. A man and a woman stepped forward immediately to greet them.

"Welcome, Jedi visitors," the woman said in a pleasant tone. She was of middle years, with a broad face and curly gray hair that framed her ruddy cheeks in a frothy cloud. "We are the Hospitality Guides, here to introduce you to our world and make sure you're comfortable. I am O-Rina and this is V-Haad."

Her companion smiled and bowed. He was tall and balding, with warm dark eyes.

The Jedi bowed in return, and Qui-Gon introduced them. "We were called here by two of your citizens."

The younger couple stepped forward. "I am V-Nen and this is my wife O-Melie," the man said. "We are the parents of O-Lana."

Jude Watson

The woman's eyes studied them, then looked down. She seemed nervous, as did her husband. No doubt they were worried about the approaching examination of their child.

"The child is at their dwelling," V-Haad said. "We will transport you there. Please follow."

The Jedi followed the Guides and the parents to a battered-looking landspeeder. Obi-Wan had never seen such an old model in use. He wondered if it would be able to start.

The repulsorlift engine fired up with a worrisome clatter, but it ran perfectly. As they sped over the rugged ground, Obi-Wan looked around curiously. They were traveling along one central unpaved road that curved around a low wall. Inside the wall were domed structures. The landspeeders parked outside looked as ancient and battered as the one they were riding in.

"There is but one city on Kegan, and we are all its keepers," O-Rina shouted over the noise of the engine. "The rest of the planet is used for food and animal cultivation. There are large areas of open space. We are passing the Tech Circle right now. Kegan is divided into circles for each area of work. The Tech Circle leads into the Communication Circle, which leads to the Study Circle, which leads to the Garden Circle, and so on. They all ring the Gathering Circle, where we hold meetings. We are heading now to the Dwelling Circle."

A shadow passed over them, and Obi-Wan looked up. A skyhopper zoomed overhead, an old model he wasn't familiar with.

"Perhaps you are amazed that our transports are still running," V-Haad said to him with a chuckle. "Here on Kegan we do not destroy, we reuse. Our Tech Circle is expert at keeping old technology functional. We have no need for the newest models."

"Do you have currency here?" Adi Gallia asked in an interested way.

V-Haad shook his head. "We are a barter economy. Everything belongs to the General Good. We may give up great

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riches here, but we have no crime. I would rather live peacefully and safely than with worry on my shoulders."

"It seems a good philosophy," Qui-Gon agreed. "Do you have a system of government?"

"We have Benevolent Guides, V-Tan and O-Vieve," O-Rina said. "They were the first to devise a new way to live here on Kegan. They have an Advising Circle, but they guide rather than rule. We are all given a voice. Everything is adjusted for the General Good."

Obi-Wan had to admit that the system seemed to work on the surface. Perhaps because Kegan was a tiny planet with a small population, it managed to avoid the strife of other worlds. As they sped by, people lifted their heads from their tasks to wave and smile. They all seemed busy and happy.

Still, he noticed something strange. "I don't see any children," he said to the Guides.

"Children are precious here," O-Rina told him. "Education is very important. They are sent to school at an early age to learn and explore. Ah, here is the Dwelling Circle."

V-Haad piloted the craft through a break in the wall and guided it to a penned enclosure where a few battered landspeeders were parked. They walked toward one of the many domed buildings that curved around the core in a spiral. Each building was connected to the next.

V-Nen opened the door and stood aside to let them in. The small room was furnished simply but comfortably, with low benches piled with thick cushions.

Qui-Gon turned to V-Haad and O-Rina. "Thank you for bringing us here. We would like to examine the child alone with the parents."

"Oh, of course, we understand your procedures," V-Haad said.

"But we cannot follow them, so sorry to say this," O-Rina added. "O-Melie and V-Nen have asked us to stay. They are nervous with outsiders."

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon looked at the parents kindly. "There is nothing to be nervous about. We will simply tell you if your child is Force-sensitive. If so, we will explain what that means and what can be done, should you wish it."

V-Nen and O-Melie exchanged glances. O-Melie swallowed. "We wish for the Hospitality Guides to stay."

V-Haad and O-Rina smiled. "You see? You must not think of us as outsiders in this house," O-Rina rushed to assure them, "Everyone on Kegan is part of the same family. This is true, O-Melie?"

"Yes," O-Melie said.

Suddenly, O-Rina and V-Haad's smiles seemed fixed to their faces, as though what was inside did not match their friendliness. A small trickle of warning snaked through Obi-Wan. He had learned to trust that feeling.

Something was wrong here. Things were not what they appeared to be. V-Haad and O-Rina had seemed to welcome them, but Obi-Wan had a feeling they were not happy the Jedi were here. Not at all.

Chapter Three

Qui-Gon didn't trust V-Haad and O-Rina from the start. Despite their wide smiles, they gave off a sense of unease that he could not attribute to being unused to strangers. And why were there Hospitality Guides when the planet allowed no visitors?

He nodded at them anyway, meeting their friendliness with his own. "Of course you may remain if V-Nen and O-Melie wish it," he said.

"There are exceptions to every rule," Adi said graciously. She, too, no doubt knew that it was better not to aggravate the situation by insisting.

"I'll get O-Lana," O-Melie said shortly. "A neighbor is watching her." She hurried from the room.

She returned in a moment with a small bundle in her arms. The child was close to a year old. She looked up at Qui-Gon with a bright, inquisitive gaze. He held out a finger. She grabbed it, then pulled it to her mouth and gnawed on it gently.

"Ah," Qui-Gon said. "I see." He studied her for some minutes, evaluating her reactions and expressions. Finally, he gave a short nod.

"You've reached your conclusion so soon?" O-Rina asked, her smile a little tight.

"Yes, I have," Qui-Gon answered. "She is definitely hungry."

Jude Watson

O-Melie and V-Nen broke into relieved smiles.

"O-Yani can feed her," O-Rina suggested. "That way we can all talk."

"O-Yani is the child caregiver for this dwelling quad," V-Haad explained to the Jedi. "There is one for each quad in each dwelling circle so that parents may still work or have time for themselves. Our child caregivers are the wisest and best among us."

O-Melie took the baby from Qui-Gon's arms. She disappeared into the other room.

With only a quick glance at Adi, Qui-Gon knew that his fellow Jedi Master had also picked up what he had: O-Lana was Force-sensitive. But how deep the Force ran was something they needed more time to discover.

"Let us sit down," Adi suggested. "While the child is feeding, we can explain more about why we have come so far to see her."

O-Melie and V-Nen sat down on a cushioned bench opposite from the Jedi. V-Haad sat on one side of them, O-Rina sat on the other. *As though they are guarding them*, Qui-Gon thought.

"If O-Lana is strong in the Force, her powers will become more apparent as she grows," Qui-Gon began. "These powers should be nurtured and directed. When they are not, the child can become confused and frightened."

V-Nen and O-Melie leaned closer, their eyes on the Jedi.

"No one is frightened on Kegan," O-Rina said firmly.

"The General Good is strong. O-Lana will be supported by us all," V-Haad added.

Adi spoke up. "The Temple on Coruscant is a place where a Force-sensitive child can learn not only how to control her gift, but how to let it guide her and connect her to all things."

V-Haad nodded, smiling. "Excellent! The Jedi Order sounds very wonderful indeed. We have Guides here that show us how to connect."

Adi stirred impatiently. Qui-Gon quickly stepped in.

"If O-Lana is a special child -"

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"Ah, here I must interrupt you," O-Rina said, her smile beaming gracious friendship at Qui-Gon. "O-Lana is special, yes...but only as each Keganite is special. V-Tan and O-Vieve have taught us all that the Guide Within is powerful in each of us. No one is any better than another."

"We are not saying that O-Lana is better," Adi said. Qui-Gon could hear the impatience she was struggling to control. "We are saying that the Force will set her apart. The Jedi path will show her how to connect to the galaxy and to others."

V-Haad beamed. "Ah, now I see! A wise and just path, I'm sure. But O-Lana will have no need of this. Here on Kegan, each Guide Within unites and forms the General Good. It would be wrong to remove O-Lana from the circle of General Good, as the circle would diminish and O-Lana would be raised to believe she was special. This is against the counsel of the Guides." V-Haad and O-Rina nodded and smiled.

Slowly, V-Nen and O-Melie nodded, too.

Qui-Gon understood Adi's frustration. V-Nen and O-Melie seemed to be listening intently, but they were not given a chance to react. Instead, the Hospitality Guides were doing all the reacting and talking. This was precisely why the Jedi preferred the first interview to be with the parents only.

He knew that despite their interjections, V-Haad and O-Rina had not truly listened to a word the Jedi had said. They had asked no questions about the Jedi path, or about O-Lana's abilities. If it were up to them, this child would never leave Kegan.

Qui-Gon focused on V-Nen and O-Melie. "If O-Lana is strong in the Force, you need to fully understand what that means. She might be able to move objects, or see things before they happen. Such things can frighten a young child."

"Not on Kegan," O-Rina said cheerily.

"Our

Benevolent

Jude Watson

Guides themselves, O-Vieve and V-Tan, have visions. We have learned to trust them. Their visions of the future have guided the present, creating the General Good."

Qui-Gon exchanged a quick glance with Adi. They had to get the parents away from the Guides. That was clear. But they also had to be mindful of Yoda's directive. They could not bring disruption to this planet. They must respect the Kegans' way of doing things.

The Hospitality Guides suddenly stood. "That was an excellent meeting," V-Haad said. "I'm so glad to hear of the wonderful Jedi way."

"And we are sure you are tired from your journey," O-Rina added. "We will show you to the quarters we have for you. There will be plenty of time for more discussion."

"Unless you must go," V-Haad said. "We know how important the Jedi are."

"We can stay as long as V-Nen and O-Melie want us to," Adi said firmly.

"I have a request," Qui-Gon said. "We would like to walk to our destination. We did have a long journey, it's true. We'd like to stretch our legs and see more of your beautiful planet."

The two Hospitality Guides exchanged glances at this unexpected request.

"Of course," O-Rina said, reluctance coloring her usual bright expression. "If you would like that ..."

"We would," Qui-Gon said firmly. "And of course we would enjoy the company of V-Nen and O-Melie as well. It will give us a chance to get to know one other."

The Guides could not refuse. O-Melie and V-Nen went to ask their neighbor O-Yani if she could continue watching O-Lana.

"The baby is sleeping now," O-Melie said quietly as she slipped back inside. "We would be happy to walk with you."

The Guides and O-Melie and V-Nen went out. Under the cover of adjusting his cloak, Qui-Gon turned back to Obi-Wan and Siri.

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"Leave us and wander off when you can," he said in a low tone. "Do it without being seen. The Guides will come after you. Avoid them. You can use the time to gather information about Kegan. Do not cause disruption or upset. Remember, observation without interference. Do not reveal that you are Jedi."

Obi-Wan and Siri nodded, their expressions alert.

Qui-Gon saw Adi's worried look. He thought he understood. They would cause a disruption. A minimal disruption, and worth the risk, in his opinion. But Adi might not think so. He was not used to having to ask another Jedi Master to approve a course of action. He waited, his eyes on her, to see if she would object.

As he waited, Qui-Gon wondered again why Yoda had sent two teams to this planet. Had Adi been sent in order to monitor his tendency to follow his instincts and bend the rules? Was she meant to oversee how he and Obi-Wan worked together?

And if she did not approve of his suggestion, what would he do?

But Adi nodded. "This had better work," she murmured as she stepped out into the bright sunlight.

Chapter Four

"Tell me, V-Haad and O-Rina," Qui-Gon said as they walked through the streets of Kegan. "I see that you have solved many problems that other worlds have not. Why don't Keganites travel to other worlds and share knowledge with them?"

"We have no need to," V-Haad said. "We have what we need for a good life here. And travel can be dangerous. The galaxy is a violent place. If we travelled it would encourage others to travel here. That could bring danger to Kegan. You can't deny that there is violence throughout the galaxy."

"No, I cannot," Qui-Gon agreed. "But there is also trade and an exchange of knowledge."

O-Rina and V-Haad merely smiled and shook their heads.

"We have everything we need," V-Haad repeated. "Importing trade or knowledge is unnecessary and harmful to the General Good."

"Why would advances in knowledge be harmful?" Obi-Wan asked, curious.

Qui-Gon saw a red flush mount on V-Haad's neck, even while his smile stayed fixed on his face.

"Kegan is a beautiful planet," Adi remarked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

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Quickly, O-Rina switched the topic to the lovely spaces of Kegan, pointing out native species as they passed the Garden Circle with its blooming flowers.

Qui-Gon remained silent. There was something else bothering him about Kegan - something besides the determined smiles on the faces of the Hospitality Guides. Suddenly he realized he had not heard laughter since he'd landed on the planet. He had not seen any public sculptures or fountains or works of art. He had not heard music. On such a peaceful planet it was unusual. Perhaps it was the lack of joy - despite the smiles - that was disturbing him.

"Here is our marketplace," O-Rina said proudly, sweeping an arm to show them the circular area crowded with stalls. "No one needs currency to buy. Everyone barter with their own surplus. No one goes hungry."

It was the oddest marketplace Qui-Gon had ever seen. Although they had just passed fruit orchards in the Garden Circle and had seen trees with boughs bent with ripe fruit, there was not a fresh fruit or vegetable to be seen. Strips of dried fruit and vegetables hung from hooks, and large bins contained grains. There were cobblers for boots and tailors who sold tunics and work gear. Shoppers went about their business with smiles and nods. They did not linger with pleasure at a display or stop to be tempted by a treat. There was plenty to see in the market, but nothing enticing to buy.

"Very ... useful," Siri said politely.

A cart headed for them, loaded with bolts of rough linen. Qui-Gon stepped quickly to his right, seeming to get out of the way. He stepped into the path of a stall keeper who was placing tools on a rack for display. The rack tilted, and the tools spilled into the path.

Quickly, Qui-Gon bent down to help the stall keeper pick up the tools. When he stood, Obi-Wan and Siri were gone.

Jude Watson

O-Rina turned. "You see, new goods arrive constantly. Here on Kegan, we ..." Her voice trailed off. Her eyes raked over the surrounding area. "But what has happened to your young Jedi?"

V-Haad swiveled, trying to take in the crowd. "Did they stop behind us?"

"I'm not sure," Qui-Gon said, pretending to search the crowd. "Perhaps they saw something that interested them."

"They haven't seen any of your technology," Adi offered. "Perhaps they were interested in those old transmitters we saw."

"Yes, curiosity. Very commendable, but we should find them," O-Rina babbled. "So easy to get lost on Kegan."

"Not a good idea to get lost," V-Haad confirmed. "The Circles can be confusing, like a maze."

O-Rina and V-Haad looked at V-Nen and O-Melie.

"If you will wait here with the Jedi..." O-Rina said.

"And show them the market..." V-Haad added.

"But do not go far," O-Rina said. "Or else we would be unable to find you. That would distress us"

She is warning them, Qui-Gon thought.

"We will wait here," V-Nen said quietly. Qui-Gon saw him reach for O-Melie's hand.

The Hospitality Guides rushed off. Qui-Gon turned to V-Nen and O-Melie. A skyhopper engine buzzed overhead, and he spoke underneath its noise. "We are grateful for this opportunity to talk to you alone."

"We have nothing more to say." O-Melie's voice was flat. "We made a mistake in contacting you. You should go."

Qui-Gon exchanged a puzzled glance with Adi. He had imagined that O-Melie and V-Nen were bursting with questions behind their silence.

V-Nen put a hand on his wife's arm. Qui-Gon noted that she was trembling. What was going on? He felt frustration well in him. How could he and Adi get through to the parents? They were obviously afraid.

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"O-Lana could be awake now," he said. "Why don't we go to see her again? You should know if O-Lana is indeed strong in the Force, even if you do not make a decision now. You can think about it."

"Let us return and examine the child," Adi Gallia added softly. "We will tell you what we think, and then we will go."

V-Nen and O-Melie hesitated. Qui-Gon could see that they wanted to agree.

"We will take complete responsibility with the Hospitality Guides," Qui-Gon added.

"All right," V-Nen said reluctantly.

V-Nen led them in a snaking path through the marketplace. They came out on a different road than the one they had taken before. He led them down backstreets, this time ending up in the back of their dwelling.

They followed the parents inside. As they entered their dwelling, an elder woman emerged. She had close-cropped russet hair threaded with silver and small dark eyes that darted nervously, like a bird's.

"You've returned," she said.

"Where is Lana, O-Yani?" O-Melie asked. "Is she sleeping?"

"She is not here," the older woman replied. "They came. They took her away."

Chapter Five

Obi-Wan and Siri did not run, or even appear to hurry. They had been taught how to move through a crowd without being seen. By the time the person turned to look at them, Siri and Obi-Wan had already melted farther into the crowd.

They left the marketplace behind, sure that O-Rina and V-Haad would comb it thoroughly.

"Let's head for the Garden Circle," Obi-Wan suggested. "It will be easier to hide there."

Siri nodded. They hurried toward the circle and ran down a path that wound through rows of leafy trees. Spotting a forested area ahead, they headed for it. They struggled through tall overgrown shrubs studded with brambles that choked the narrow trail. Finally, they stopped in a clearing to catch their breath.

Siri pulled a bramble out of her hair. "I don't know why we had to leave at all," she grumbled. "Just when things were getting interesting, Qui-Gon comes up with a plan to get rid of us. How am I going to learn if I never get to watch two Jedi Masters in action?"

"The mission is what drives us," Obi-Wan said.

Siri tore another bramble from her blond hair. "You don't have to repeat Jedi wisdom to me, Obi-Wan. I took the same classes you did."

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Suddenly, she sighed and flopped back onto the soft grass. "I'm just disappointed. I wanted to see how Qui-Gon and Adi would handle this. Something is very strange on this planet. Those Hospitality Guides gave me the shivers. Who knew a smile could be so eerie?"

"That's why Qui-Gon wanted to see the parents alone," Obi-Wan told her.

Siri gave him a sidelong look that seemed like pure disgust. "You don't have to explain the plan to me. I was there."

She jumped up before he could react. She was always doing that, Obi-Wan thought. She never gave him a chance to apologize or explain. Not that he wanted to.

"Come on," she said. "We shouldn't stay in one place for too long."

"I know that," Obi-Wan said, moving ahead.

Siri picked up her pace, and they hurried through the overgrown paths. Neither would let the other lead.

This is ridiculous, Obi-Wan thought. Haven't I learned anything in all my years at the Temple? I shouldn't be competing with Siri.

But he couldn't fall back and let her lead, either.

"Maybe we should find the Tech Circle," Obi-Wan suggested. "If we're supposed to investigate how the society really works here on Kegan, it seems like a good place to start."

"That's the first place they'd look for us," Siri scoffed.

They emerged from the bushy overgrowth and found themselves alongside a field of tall grass. A dirt path ran along the edge of the field, and they turned down it.

"Do you have a better suggestion?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I think we should mingle with the people," Siri said. "It's a human population, so we'll mix in. And we wear similar clothes, too. We might be able to pick up lots of information just by talking to people."

Before Obi-Wan could reply, the noise of an engine split the air. A landspeeder was approaching. It was too late to retreat into the shrubbery.

Jude Watson

"Let's try to bluff," he murmured to Siri.

The landspeeder drew up alongside them. A burly middle-aged man dressed in a chroma-sheath tunic smiled at them in a friendly way.

"What are you two doing out here?"

"Just out walking," Obi-Wan said.

"No school today?" the man asked in a pleasant tone.

Here was a trap. Obi-Wan didn't want to say they were visitors. That would surely send O-Rina and V-Haad on their trail.

"We have permission to be out," Siri said. "Our parents need help at home. Speaking of which, we'd better head there."

"Suit yourself." The man waved them on.

They began to walk past him. But something was wrong. The Force surged, warning Obi-Wan a moment before an electro-jabber swiped at his knees, then his shoulder. They were both glancing blows, enough to send Obi-Wan crashing to the ground. A split second later, Siri crashed next to him. Her breath left her in a hiss. She had never felt an electro-jabber before.

The man picked them up and dumped them like cargo on the rear floor of the landspeeder. Then they roared off.

Chapter Six

"O-Lana is gone?" O-Melie's face went dead white. She stumbled backward, and V-Nen steadied her. She pressed a hand to her mouth. "How could you have let her go?"

"I had to," O-Yani replied, her eyes darting from O-Melie to V-Nen. "They said she was due for her routine med check. There is no reason for concern. She will come back. She will not disappear."

V-Nen shot a glance at O-Melie. *A warning glance*, Qui-Gon thought. He saw O-Melie swallow. The look on her face was transformed. Her constricted facial muscles smoothed out. Her lips tilted upward in a strained smile.

"Of course," she said. "I understand."

They heard the sound of running footsteps, and the Hospitality Guides hurried toward them.

"Ah, we found you!" O-Rina said.

V-Haad's smile did not falter. "We thought you were to wait in the market."

"We must have misunderstood," Qui-Gon said. "We asked if we could return here. So sorry if we caused you upset."

"O-Lana has been taken," O-Melie said, struggling to keep a pleasant expression on her face. "O-Yani says the Med Circle

Jude Watson

Guides came for her. But she just had her routine med exam. Perhaps there is some mistake."

"We shall check on it," O-Rina assured her. "Do not be concerned. A child can't be too healthy!"

V-Nen looked as ashen as his wife, but his face was frozen into the same pleasant mask. "Parental notification before a med check always takes place. Strange that O-Lana was taken without it."

"Slips can occur, even on Kegan," V-Haad said in a jovial tone. "But that doesn't excuse them," he added quickly.

"Even a moment of worry about a child can be an eternity," O-Rina said sympathetically. "V-Haad and I will be happy to intercede for you. We'll go right to V-Tan and O-Vieve if we have to."

"We are grateful," V-Nen said through tight lips.

O-Rina turned to the Jedi. "Of course, all this will take time. We know the Jedi are far too crucial to the galaxy to linger. We will completely understand if you must return to your more important tasks."

"Unfortunately we did not find your young aides," V-Haad said pleasantly. "Perhaps you have communication devices that can summon them."

"Thank you for your concern," Qui-Gon answered smoothly. "But I'm afraid you overestimate our demand in the galaxy. We can certainly remain here until the child is found. As for our aides, I'm afraid we're at a loss."

Adi picked up on his strategy. "We have tried to contact them on our comlinks," she said. "They are not responding. Perhaps they lost them, or our technology does not work on your planet. We will have to search for them."

"We are sorry if this causes trouble for you," Qui-Gon added. "We would like permission to travel among your people. You know how the young can be. They are most likely exploring and have forgotten the time."

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The Hospitality Guides were trapped. They could not refuse such a sensible request. But they looked uncertain.

"Kegan is a peaceful planet," V-Haad said haltingly. "Yet our people are unused to foreigners. They could feel fear, which could make them act in unaccustomed ways. We wouldn't want you to run into trouble of any kind ..."

"Jedi are used to walking among strangers," Adi said, inclining her head. "We are not worried."

"We will be in touch," Qui-Gon said, bowing to the Guides.

The Guides turned away. O-Melie stayed still as a block of stone, but her burning eyes beseeched the Jedi. *Find her!*

Then the Hospitality Guides turned back again, and her bland smile returned.

"The mother is frightened," Adi said.

"The father as well," Qui-Gon said. "He hides it slightly better."

Adi sighed. They had paused by the Gardening Circle before going on. "I am afraid that with every step we take, we violate the Council's wishes. We are interfering. We could make enemies here."

"A child is missing," Qui-Gon said. "Never mind that she is Force-sensitive. Her parents are obviously terrified. The situation has changed. And it is because of our presence. If we had not come, the child would be safe."

Adi nodded reluctantly. "The child could be where the Guides say she is. They want to keep us away from her. That doesn't mean they'll harm her. We can't take bold action without ascertaining if the child is in danger."

Qui-Gon knew the child wasn't safe - why else would the parents be so afraid? But he held his tongue. He and Adi Gallia needed to work as a team.

Adi went on thoughtfully. "Our mission is also to demonstrate to Kegan the benefits of joining the galactic alliance.

Jude Watson

We are promoting peace. All I am saying is that we must tread carefully."

"We are telling each other things we already know," Qui-Gon said restlessly. "Let's raise Obi-Wan and Siri on their comlinks."

He activated his comlink, but Obi-Wan did not answer. Adi did the same with hers, but there was no answer from Siri, either.

"Perhaps they're in a situation where it is better not to answer," Adi suggested. "We told them to mingle with the native population and not advertise that they were Jedi."

"True," Qui-Gon agreed. "Let's try again later. In the meantime, searching for them will give us a good cover to look for O-Lana. Let's head for the Med Circle."

They roamed through the various clinics, looking into nurseries and care centers. No one stopped them. In their rough tunics with their lightsabers hidden, they could pass for native Keganites.

"If we could access their records ..." Qui-Gon murmured to Adi.

"That would involve violating their security," she said with a shake of her head. "A serious breach of conduct."

"But it's the only way," Qui-Gon argued. "Obviously they've hidden the child."

"We should keep searching," Adi said firmly.

Qui-Gon had a hard time suppressing his frustration. Cooperation among Jedi was a given. It was how they were raised to interact. But what happened when they disagreed?

"For a little longer," he said.

She arched an eyebrow at him. Tall and forbidding, with dark golden skin and blue facial markings, Adi Gallia was known to subdue a boisterous group of young students with just a glance. Qui-Gon was not as easily intimidated.

"There you are!" They heard O-Rina's chirping tone behind them. "Have you found your young aides? Strange that you are looking in the Med Circle."

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"Young Jedi are interested in all facets of society," Adi answered, composed.

"And how is the search for O-Lana?" Qui-Gon asked. "Strange that three people have disappeared in one morning."

"We have put another team on the problem," V-Haad said quickly. "O-Vieve and V-Tan thought it best."

"Perhaps we should speak with your Benevolent Guides," Qui-Gon said. "We would like permission to search the records of Kegan."

V-Haad was already shaking his head. "We would do anything for the Jedi. But appointments with V-Tan and O-Vieve must be requested weeks in advance. They are very busy."

"But you said they just saw you," Adi pointed out.

"This is true," O-Rina said, her ruddy cheeks deepening in color. "We are high-level Guides, you see."

"I think you will find that they will see us," Qui-Gon said firmly. "Shall we go together, or will you point the way?"

His tone told them he would not take no for an answer. O-Rina and V-Haad nodded reluctantly. "Of course, we are at the Jedi's service ..."

Qui-Gon echoed the blank smile of the Guides. "Then lead on."

Chapter Seven

"I still can't feel my legs," Siri whispered. Obi-Wan could hear the fear in her voice.

"It will wear off," he assured her. "But it will take a few hours."

They had been traveling for some time. The city had been left behind. From his position on the floor of the speeder, Obi-Wan could see a glimpse of sky. He had seen no other speeders around them for kilometers now, just the top branches of the trees, dancing in a brisk breeze. The temperature was dropping; perhaps they were heading to a higher altitude.

At last the engines thrummed to a lower speed and they stopped. The door next to Obi-Wan opened and he was dragged out roughly. His legs were too unsteady to hold him and he was dumped on the ground. Siri was dumped next to him.

"I thought children were revered on Kegan," Obi-Wan said, his cheek in the dirt.

A boot was suddenly placed on his head. His face was pushed farther into the dirt. "No back talk. You know very well that truancy is a criminal act on Kegan. You're old enough to be punished for it."

"But we're not Keganites!" Siri protested.

"I've heard all the excuses. Shut your mouth."

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"We're from another world. We're visitors," Siri insisted furiously. "Take your boot off my friend's head."

The boot was removed from Obi-Wan's head and landed on Siri's shoulder. "Sure," the man said.

Enough, Obi-Wan thought. He struggled to rise, but the electro-jabber had done its work. He knew he wouldn't regain full use of his arms and legs for several more hours. It would be impossible to use his lightsaber effectively until then. Besides, he'd been instructed not to show Keganites that he was a Jedi. Obi-Wan tried to roll closer to Siri but couldn't move. He watched helplessly as the boot increased pressure on Siri's shoulder, driving her face into the dirt.

"What did I say about back talk?" the man asked again.

Siri gritted her teeth. Her vivid blue eyes blazed. She spat out the dirt in her mouth. Still, she didn't answer.

"V-Tarz!" A voice boomed from behind them. Instantly, V-Tarz took his boot off Siri's shoulder.

Obi-Wan saw another man approach, wearing the same navy chromasheath tunic as V-Tarz.

"Why are these students on the ground?" the second man demanded.

"Resisting capture," V-Tarz responded.

"No need to use physical force," the other man said. "We've discussed this before. The Learning works with love, not fear. Take them to class."

Obi-Wan was hauled to his feet. He locked his knees so that he would not fall. Siri did the same.

"But we're not Keganites," Obi-Wan protested to the second guard, who seemed more friendly. "We're visitors."

The second guard's dark gaze flicked over Obi-Wan and Siri. "No one visits Kegan. Three marks for lying." He turned away. "Take them to class."

V-Tarz nudged them with the handle end of his electro-jabber. "You heard V-Brose. Get moving."

Jude Watson

"Let's make a break for it," Siri murmured to Obi-Wan as they stumbled across the yard, their muscles like pudding.

"Are you kidding? We wouldn't last five meters," Obi-Wan whispered through his teeth. "We have to wait until the effect of the electro-jabber wears off. We'll figure out where we are and contact Qui-Gon and Adi Gallia."

"Just let me at V-Tarz before we get out of here," Siri muttered.

"That does not sound like a Jedi," Obi-Wan said disapprovingly. "V-Tarz is not our enemy, merely an obstacle to our mission."

"That *obstacle* just ground the faces of two helpless young people into the dirt," Siri responded. "Just what do you require in an enemy, Obi-Wan?"

Their conversation stopped abruptly as V-Tarz pushed them against a wall. Rough hands reached under Obi-Wan's travel cloak. V-Tarz brought out Obi-Wan's lightsaber and examined it.

"What is this?"

Obi-Wan tensed. He could not lose his lightsaber without a fight, no matter how weak he was.

"It's just a hand-warming device," Siri said.

V-Tarz shoved it back in Obi-Wan's belt. "Then I don't need it. What's this ...?"

He'd found Obi-Wan's comlink. He pulled it out of its pouch, then grabbed Siri's.

"You won't be needing these," V-Tarz said, holding them up. "They look new," he said, examining them. "Your parents must work in the Comm Circle in order to have comlinks like these." He stuck them in his pocket, a delighted smile on his face. Obi-Wan was afraid he'd take their electrobinoculars next.

"For the last time, slab-brain, we're not Keganites," Siri snapped.

V-Tarz raised the electro-jabber. Obi-Wan tensed. Another blow could put Siri out of commission for a very long time.

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A carved bust of a serene-looking woman sat on a high shelf over them. Obi-Wan called on the Force. The bust rocketed to the edge of the shelf and flew off. It missed V-Tarz by millimeters and crashed to the floor, sending chips of marble everywhere. V-Tarz stared down at it in disbelief.

A door near them opened. A Keganite woman stuck her head in. Her hair was pulled back behind her ears in a severe style, and she wore a plain brown tunic over black trousers.

"V-Tarz! What's going on? I'm trying to conduct a class." Her gaze travelled over the broken bust. "You smashed O-Vieve!"

"It fell, O-Bin," V-Tarz said. "An unfortunate accident. But here are two students for you. Keep your excellent eye on them - they're troublemakers."

O-Bin cast a cool gaze over Siri and Obi-Wan. Then she smiled. Obi-Wan felt a chill move through him. The smile was eerily similar to O-Rina's and V-Haad's.

"There are no troublemakers in The Learning," O-Bin said. "Come."

Glad to get away from V-Tarz, Obi-Wan and Siri followed the teacher through the durasteel door into the classroom. The door clanged shut behind them and an automatic lock snapped shut.

Students dressed in gray tunics sat on long benches that ran the width of the room, row after row. Small data screens rose from the floor in front of each of them at eye-level. The students sat erect, hands at their sides. Only their eyes moved as they examined Obi-Wan and Siri.

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake," Siri said to O-Bin. "We aren't Keganites. We're ..."

Obi-Wan heard a few titters from the class. A slight, sandy-haired boy with hair that brushed his shoulders gave him a sympathetic look, then quickly looked down at his data screen. O-Bin swiveled and fixed her smiling gaze on row after row. The room went still.

"Sit," she told Siri and Obi-Wan.

"But we are not -" Obi-Wan began.

Jude Watson

"Sit." The smile didn't waver. "Put on the robes for The Learning." She handed them two gray tunics.

Obi-Wan and Siri exchanged glances. Should they continue to resist, or give in for now? Mindful of Qui-Gon's orders, Obi-Wan slipped into the tunic. Siri did the same.

The same slender boy moved over to make room for them. Obi-Wan and Siri sat. Immediately two data screens rose in front of them.

The teacher looked at them, her fingers poised over her datapad. "Names, please."

"Obi-Wan Kenobi," Obi-Wan said. "Of Coruscant."

"Three marks for lying," O-Bin said, smiling. "One mark for not giving your full name."

"That is my full name!" Obi-Wan protested.

"Three more marks for lying," O-Bin said. "I see you already have three. That makes ... ten marks. Class?"

"Marks reveal the Inner Guide's confusion," the class chanted in unison.

"V-Obi is confused," the teacher said, nodding. "His Inner Guide is cloudy. It is up to all of you to bring him to his contribution to the General Good."

The class nodded solemnly.

"Have we landed on Weird World?" Siri whispered to Obi-Wan.

"Two marks for talking, and what is your name?" The teacher turned to Siri.

"Siri -"

"One mark for not giving your full name, O-Siri," the teacher said. "We each have a letter before our names that we share with others. This demonstrates our commitment to the General Good. Class?"

"We are all unique, yet none is better than another. Such is the General Good," the class chanted.

"This is generally crazy," Siri muttered.

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"Three marks for talking after being warned, O-Siri," O-Bin said. "Let us return to the lesson."

Obi-Wan's data screen flashed blue. Letters began to crawl across the screen:

TRAVEL TO THE INNER CORE IS DANGEROUS. THE
FIRST OBSTACLE IS THE DELACRIX SYSTEM.

Obi-Wan frowned. He knew the Delacrix System. They'd passed it on the way to Kegan. Qui-Gon had said it was a thriving system of planets orbiting around three suns. All the worlds traded together in harmony. They had all recently joined the Galactic Senate.

"Who can tell me why the Delacrix System is dangerous?" the teacher asked. "O-Iris?"

"The Delacrix System is dangerous because it is controlled by pirates," a small, red-haired girl said in an almost-whisper. "Its third sun is in perpetual nova, so it can melt the engines of passing craft. The pirates divert passing traffic into the outer edges of the exploding sun to force a landing."

Obi-Wan stared at the small girl in amazement. Everything she'd said was untrue.

Observation without interference, Qui-Gon had said. If he kept his mouth closed, he could learn.

Just as Obi-Wan resolved to stay silent no matter what, Siri spoke up.

"But that's not true!" she protested.

"I did not call on you, O-Siri," O-Bin said severely. "If you wish to ask a question, touch your data screen."

Siri touched her data screen.

O-Bin's lips were tight as she smiled and turned back to her. "Yes, O-Siri?"

"The Delacrix System is not overrun by pirates," Siri said.

"That is not a question," O-Bin said. Her cheeks flushed red. "Two marks."

Jude Watson

"And its sun is not in perpetual nova," Siri added. "It's a peaceful system with a thriving trade."

"Three marks." O-Bin's smile was forced. "That makes eleven marks all together. You have caught up to your stubborn companion."

"Come on, Obi-Wan," Siri muttered without moving her lips. "Give me a hand here."

Obi-Wan sighed. He touched his data screen.

"Question, V-Obi?"

"Delacrix is a safe, peaceful system," Obi-Wan said. "Travel is not dangerous. Caution is required, but -"

"Four marks for disobedience!" O-Bin's voice screeched. She cleared her throat and smiled. "You are not contributing to the General Good. Now we turn to the next outlying system. Please consult your screens."

The words scrolled across Obi-Wan's screen.

THE PLANET STIEG PRESENTS MORE HAZZARDS.

"Can anyone say why?" O-Bin asked, facing the class. "V-Davi?"

The slender, sandy-haired boy spoke up. "Stieg has no organized government or ruling system. Tribes are locked in constant warfare."

Siri stood up on legs that still trembled from the effects of the electro-jabber. "Hold on. The Stieg-Fan are peaceful and fun-loving. And Stieg has a perfectly fine system of government!"

O-Bin's face grew flushed. "Thank you for your contribution, O-Siri, but it is a *lie*."

"I don't lie!"

Obi-Wan wanted to tug on Siri's tunic to make her sit down. But he couldn't undo what she'd already said. He'd have to back her up.

"Siri is right. Stieg is peaceful," Obi-Wan said.

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O-Bin seemed about to explode. She squeezed her hands together. Then, she smiled.

"You two make it difficult to keep up with how many punishment marks you have," she said in a tone that hit each word like a sharp rap against a tuneless bell. "I'm afraid greater punishment is called for. You will both clean up the food service area for the entire school after the evening meal."

The sandy-haired student called V-Davi looked at them sympathetically.

"Think again," Siri shot back. "I don't have to follow your rules. I'm not under your authority!"

"If you choose to refuse your punishment and hurt the General Good," O-Bin continued, "not one student will eat today."

Fifty pairs of angry eyes turned and stared at Obi-Wan and Siri.

"Now, do you still refuse?" O-Bin asked.

Under cover of his tunic, Obi-Wan nudged Siri to silence. He would not be responsible for depriving the students of food. When they didn't respond, O-Bin turned away, a smug smile of satisfaction on her face.

"Great," Siri whispered. "Not only are we trapped, we're trapped with dirty dishes."

O-Bin didn't turn. "Four punishment marks, O-Siri," she said sweetly.

Chapter Eight

Qui-Gon and Adi stood in the middle of the Gathering Circle. Around them rose an open-air coliseum with stone slabs serving as benches.

"All Keganites participate in the governing of Kegan," V-Haad said proudly. "V-Tan and O-Vieve bring problems to the people. They do not supply solutions, merely proposals. Every citizen gets a vote."

A low, circular building was built next to the coliseum. In one of the few examples of finery on Kegan, its dome was painted gold.

"Here is the Central Dwelling, where our Benevolent Guides reside," O-Rina said. "We will request an audience for you."

O-Rina and V-Haad brought them to a small room with whitewashed walls that contained benches for seating. "They will be with you shortly," O-Rina said. "We'll await you at the front entrance."

In moments the door opened and two elder Keganites in soft white robes appeared. The woman's silver hair was braided and hung down her back. The man's was silver as well. Their beaming smiles seemed more sincere than those of the Hospitality Guides.

"Welcome, Qui-Gon Jinn and Adi Gallia," the woman said. "I am O-Vieve, and this is V-Tan. It is our honor to greet you."

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The two Jedi bowed.

"We hope that you will be able to assist us," Qui-Gon said. "We arrived with our Padawans, Siri and Obi-Wan. They wandered off and we have been unable to find them."

V-Tan folded his hands. "The Hospitality Guides have informed us of this. We are concerned."

"We have decided to launch a search," O-Vieve said. "We will inform our citizens that the children are missing. We should have results very soon."

"We should like to join in the search," Qui-Gon said.

O-Vieve nodded at him sympathetically. "I feel your concern, yet you do not know our world. We can search quicker and more efficiently. V-Tan and I would be grateful if you would accept our hospitality during this short time. We have guest quarters prepared here in the Central Dwelling. I am certain you need food and rest. We will bring your Padawans to you."

Qui-Gon was about to protest, but Adi nodded. "Thank you," she said.

V-Tan and O-Vieve murmured that it was no trouble at all, and they were happy to be able to meet the gracious and kind Jedi. The Hospitality Guides would be waiting in the front reception hallway to show them the way to their rooms.

Qui-Gon and Adi strode into the hallway. As soon as they were out of earshot, Qui-Gon murmured, "We can't rely on them to search."

"Of course not," Adi agreed. "But if we had continued to protest, it wouldn't have done any good. They wouldn't have given in. They are not afraid of us the way O-Rina and V-Haad are."

"Afraid of us?" Qui-Gon asked, startled. "Nervous, perhaps. But why would they be afraid of us?"

"That is something I do not know," Adi said. "Yet."

Qui-Gon paused. The reception area was just ahead, and he did not want the Hospitality Guides to see them. "We need to go back to the beginning. We need to talk to V-Nen and O-Melie."

Jude Watson

Perhaps Obi-Wan and Siri's failure to come back is linked to O-Lana's disappearance."

Adi nodded. "How can we avoid O-Rina and V-Haad?"

"This way," Qui-Gon said, turning and heading back down the hallway. He turned to the left, then the right.

"How do you know where to go?" Adi asked.

Qui-Gon smiled. "While I was at the Temple, I took sensory lessons from Jedi Master Tahl. When she was blinded, she learned to improve her other senses. I'm following my sense of smell."

Adi concentrated. "Food. Something is cooking."

"And where there is food, there is waste. Where there is waste, there is usually an exit," Qui-Gon explained.

"And I always look for a window," Adi said, hurrying beside him.

The kitchen was empty except for a cook who was grinding a vegetable into a paste, his back to the door. Qui-Gon and Adi Gallia moved swiftly and silently past him and slipped out the door into a small area with waste bins. They skirted them and headed back in the direction they had come.

The distance wasn't far, and soon they stood at V-Nen and O-Melie's door. Qui-Gon knocked softly.

V-Nen opened it. The hopeful expression on his face faded when he saw the Jedi.

"I thought there was word of Lana," he said.

"You must trust us," Adi told him. "We can help you protect your daughter."

O-Melie joined her husband at the door.

"We have nothing more to say," V-Nen said. "I must head for work at the Communications Circle now."

"We are late and must be going," O-Melie said. "Please do not follow us."

O-Melie's words were cool, but her eyes pleaded with them. What was she asking?

Before they could react, she shut the door in their faces.

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Adi looked at Qui-Gon. The glance they exchanged was full of meaning. They did not speak for a moment as a skyhopper buzzed overhead.

"I suppose we should head back," Adi said.

"Yes," Qui-Gon agreed. "We can do no good here."

They turned and left the Dwelling Circle. But hope rose in Qui-Gon's heart. At last he was beginning to understand.

Chapter Nine

Siri heaved another tub of dirty dishes into the sink. Sudsy water slopped on the floor.

"What slab-brain decided that turbo dish-cleaners were bad for the General Good?" she asked, picking up a cleaning rag.

"Menial labor attentively completed adds to the General Good," Obi-Wan said.

She shot him a sidelong look. "You sound like one of them."

"It's starting to sink in." Obi-Wan dried the last dish from the enormous rack and placed it on a pile.

Siri gazed out at the narrow band of windows that ran along the top of the wall. All the windows at the Learning Circle were set high in the walls. They allowed light in, but restricted a view of outside. They had been told that afternoon that contemplation of the outdoors was a waste of time they should be devoting to The Learning.

"It's getting dark," Siri said. "I say we break out tonight. We still have our lightsabers."

"I think we should wait," Obi-Wan said.

"For what?" Siri asked, rinsing off a plate. "The breakfast dishes?"

Obi-Wan spoke calmly. "For several things. One, we don't know what kind of security the Learning Circle has. We should

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discover that before we try. Remember that Qui-Gon and Adi told us not to cause disruption."

"But that was before we were captured," Siri argued.

"I know," Obi-Wan said. "No doubt they are worried by now. But that's still not a reason to try a risky escape. If we plan it, we might be able to avoid a fight."

Siri gazed at him in disbelief. "Is that all you care about? Avoiding a fight?"

Obi-Wan struggled to hold on to his temper. "I've learned on missions with Qui-Gon that it is always best to avoid a fight if you can. You should have learned that at the Temple."

Siri flushed pink. She knew that Obi-Wan was right. A Jedi always sought to avoid a conflict. *Infinitely more ways there are to reach a goal*, Yoda had said many times. *Try them all you should*.

"You seem to forget that we're Jedi," she said. "If we just reveal that we are, they'd let us go. They'd know that we aren't Keganites then."

"But we don't *know* that they'd let us go," Obi-Wan countered. "It's an option, but I still think we should wait. Qui-Gon told us not to reveal that we are Jedi. And Yoda told us to avoid disruption at all costs. Until we absolutely have to, I say we stay undercover. What if we're really being held because we are Jedi? Or what if we get Qui-Gon and Adi Gallia in trouble by proving that we're Jedi? We don't know what our Masters are up to right now." Obi-Wan shook his head. "There are too many questions. Unless we can find a way to leave quietly, we should remain for the time being. Think of it this way - we can learn about Kegan society here. This is like an indoctrination camp."

"Are you always so cautious?" Siri asked him.

"I wasn't always," Obi-Wan answered. "But now I am."

He met her gaze steadily. She knew what he was referring to. He had acted impulsively once, and almost lost his way. Now he knew: It was always tempting to act. It was often wiser to wait.

Frustrated, Siri threw the cleaning rag into the sink. It slapped against the water and sent another shower of suds onto the floor.

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan sighed. After the dish cleaning, there would be plenty of mopping to do, too.

"So we have to stay and listen to lies while we clean up after the whole school?" Siri asked, disgusted.

"We wouldn't have been forced to clean up if you didn't keep correcting O-Bin," Obi-Wan observed mildly.

"And let that teacher fill the students' minds with lies?" Siri asked in disbelief. "How can we do that, Obi-Wan? You know that everything they teach here is wrong."

"What you said didn't make a difference," Obi-Wan argued. "No one believed us, and we got stuck with cleaning detail."

"So this is all my fault," Siri said.

"It's not up to me to assign blame," Obi-Wan said testily. "But if you insist, yes!"

"You're the one who didn't want to break out when we could!" Siri exploded. "We should have made a run for it."

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to refute her, but a hesitant voice came from behind him.

"That wouldn't have been a good idea."

They turned. V-Davi, the slight boy from class, stood in the doorway. His hands were stuffed in the pockets of his tunic.

"The Security Guides have great power here," he said. "It's not wise to oppose them. And besides, it's against the General Good."

"Thanks for the tip," Obi-Wan said.

Siri picked up a mop and began to clean up the water and suds she'd spilled. "Why are you here, V-Davi?" she asked in a kindly way. "You don't have punishment marks too, do you?"

"No. I have food preparation duty tomorrow. I thought I would get a head start tonight." V-Davi headed for a bin of vegetables. He started up a grinding machine and began to toss them in.

"You mean they actually prepare the stuff they serve?" Siri grumbled. "I thought they just scooped it out of the trash bin."

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Obi-Wan grinned. It was true; the food at the Learning Circle was terrible. All vegetables and meats were ground into a paste and then formed into round disks and cooked. The disks were so tasteless and tough that they could be used for shockball. He glanced at V-Davi to see if he had taken offense.

V-Davi's face was frozen in surprise, as if he'd never heard a joke before. Then he laughed. "The food is bad, yes. But it's not my fault. They tell me how to cook it."

"I wasn't blaming you, V-Davi," Siri told him. "You'd have to be a genius to come up with food this bad."

"At least I can help you finish cleaning up," V-Davi offered. "I don't mind."

"Don't worry about it," Siri told him as she finished mopping. "I got us into this. But you can tell us more about yourself while we work."

"How old were you when you came to the Learning Circle?" Obi-Wan asked.

"It was seven years ago. I was two years old," V-Davi said as he ran more vegetables through the grinder. "My parents died during the great Toli-X outbreak. I was sent here. Most children on Kegan don't start The Learning until they are four years old."

Siri exchanged a glance with Obi-Wan. Toli-X had been a deadly mutated virus that travelled through asteroid molds from world to world ten years before. A vaccine had been developed shortly after it had appeared. In other words, if Kegan had been in touch with other worlds in the galaxy, no one need have died.

Between them, a silent message was passed: *Don't tell him.* Not if we don't have to.

"Do you like living here?" Siri asked, turning to dry the dishes on the rack.

"Of course," V-Davi responded. "Thanks to The Learning, I am preparing how to best serve the General Good."

It sounded like one of the rote responses they had listened to in class. Obi-Wan helped Siri dry the tall stack of dishes. "Do you ever get to leave the Learning Circle?"

Jude Watson

"When your course of study is complete," V-Davi said. "Usually around sixteen. But you know this."

"We aren't from here, V-Davi," Siri said. "O-Bin doesn't believe us, but it's true. Where do you go when you leave the Learning Circle?"

"Where the General Good is best served," V-Davi responded promptly. He scraped the vegetable mush into a big container and placed it in the cooler that ran along one wall. Then he began to carry the dried plates to the racks. "When you are twelve, you appear before a committee in which your aptitude is assessed. Then you receive more specialized training in your area."

"But what if you're assigned to something you don't want to do?" Siri asked.

"You are happy, because you know you are contributing to the General Good." V-Davi mopped up a bit more soapy water that Siri had spilled. He leaned against the sink and put his hand in his pocket nervously. "I'll probably go into food service. There is a shortage."

Siri gave him a shrewd glance. "What do you want to do, V-Davi?"

"I want to work in the Animal Circle," V-Davi admitted. "But there is a surplus. So it wouldn't help the ..."

"General Good," Siri completed. "I get it."

Suddenly, Obi-Wan heard a *peep peep*. Was it a warning security device? He looked around quickly, but could see no lights or indicators.

V-Davi looked nervous. "We'd better go."

Again, Obi-Wan heard the *peep peep*. He realized that it was coming from V-Davi's pocket.

"What's that?" Siri asked bluntly.

V-Davi moved toward the door. "Nothing. I must go. Lockdown is soon." He hurried away, and something floated through the air back toward Obi-Wan. He caught it. It was a feather.

"V-Davi," he called. "Stop."

V-Davi stopped.

"What are you holding?"

Siri walked forward. She peered into V-Davi's cupped hands. "It's a humming peeper."

Obi-Wan stepped forward. V-Davi must have been hiding the tiny bird in his pocket. It perched in his cupped hands, a lovely creature with bright yellow and blue feathers.

V-Davi's eyes darted fearfully from Obi-Wan to Siri. "It has a hurt wing. I found it in the yard. I was going to turn it in. I swear I was!"

Siri reached out a finger and stroked the bird. "He's cute."

"I-I just rescued this one creature," V-Davi stammered. "I would never break the rules of The Learning."

Suddenly, Obi-Wan saw a tiny quivering nose stick out of V-Davi's other pocket.

"And what's that?"

V-Davi's eyes were wide. "That's a baby ferbil," he whispered. "Please don't turn me in, V-Obi."

"Of course we won't turn you in," Obi-Wan assured him. He stroked the furry creature's head.

"Is having pets against the rules?" Siri asked.

"Of course. There are no domestic pets allowed on Kegan," V-Davi said. "It is contrary to the General Good to lavish attention on a subspecies. They are used for food products and cultivation only." His gray eyes studied them, suddenly fearful. "You are outsiders, aren't you?"

"Yes," Siri said. "But we're also your friends."

A relieved smile spread over V-Davi's face. "Students of The Learning are not encouraged to form personal attachments. If you make a close friend, you find he or she is moved to another Learning quad. So we must be careful. But you must call me Davi now. When one forms a bond on Kegan, the title letter of your name is dropped."

"Then you can call us Obi-Wan and Siri," Obi-Wan said.

Jude Watson

Davi reached out and put one hand on Obi-Wan's forearm and one on Siri's. "You are my first friends. Maybe it does not add to the General Good. But I am happy. Now, since you are my friends, on Kegan we believe in trying to help our bonded friends achieve their hearts desire." He took a deep breath. "Therefore, Obi and Siri, I will help you escape. Tonight."

Chapter Ten

The constant buzzing noise should have alerted him. Instead, it had become background, and Qui-Gon had ceased to notice it. That was what they counted on, he supposed. A constant presence can be easier to ignore than a random one.

There was complete surveillance on Kegan. The skyhoppers overhead had to be equipped with listening and watching devices. It was the only explanation.

V-Nen and O-Melie had asked for their help in the only way available to them: with glances and hints.

Qui-Gon and Adi did not dare speak, even in the open air. Without another word, they started toward the Communications Circle.

Qui-Gon's keen gaze swept across the round buildings in the Circle. He saw one open window in the building to his left. He indicated it to Adi with a tilt of his head. She nodded.

They walked into the building and quickly made their way through a maze of corridors toward the room with the open window. They were sure V-Nen and O-Melie would be waiting.

The door was slightly ajar. Qui-Gon hesitated outside.

"Come in quickly please," V-Nen whispered.

"And please close the door," O-Melie added.

Jude Watson

"This is a safe room," V-Nen said as soon as the Jedi entered and shut the door behind them. "Melie and I have installed anti-surveillance devices. The skyhoppers you may have noticed overhead are actually unpiloted auto-hoppers that contain audio and visual surveillance devices. Everything we say and do is recorded. There are transmitters in our homes that beam up to them."

Qui-Gon and Adi exchanged glances. "We thought that might be the case," Qui-Gon said. "How did the citizens of Kegan allow this?"

"It began as an anti-crime measure," O-Melie explained. "Society was stable, but petty theft and pilfering was common after we changed to a bartering system. V-Tan and O-Vieve proposed we use autohoppers as security devices, and we all voted on it. Originally they were supposed to patrol the market only. Then it was extended to the Dwelling Circle and beyond. No one expected that it would be used to monitor conversations and activities. It happened slowly, and now we are watched all the time."

"But if every citizen on Kegan gets a vote, couldn't you vote them out?" Adi asked.

V-Nen shook his head. "Every citizen gets a vote, but V-Tan and O-Vieve decide what we should vote on."

O-Melie gave a sad smile. "We have the illusion of democracy. Not the reality."

"Tell us how we can help you," Adi said gently. "What do you think happened to O-Lana?"

O-Melie and V-Nen exchanged a frightened glance. "We are worried about her safety," V-Nen said quietly. "There are whispers and rumors about children who vanish."

Qui-Gon recalled something that had bothered him at the time. "Is that what O-Yani meant when she said O-Lana would not *disappear*?"

O-Melie nodded. "Some children enroll at the Learning Circle and are never heard from again."

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"The Learning Circle?" Qui-Gon asked quickly. "Where is that?"

"That Circle is not in the city of Kegan, but in an outlying area," V-Nen explained. "The

Learning is a course of teaching developed by O-Vieve and V-Tan. It was introduced about fifteen years ago. Before that there was no central authority and children were schooled at home."

"We don't know where it is, only that it is in the open country," O-Melie answered. "It is thought better for the children if parents are not allowed there. Children attend the Learning Circle from the age of four. There are no exceptions. Truants are dealt with harshly."

"That's why there are no children on the streets," Adi said.

"Obi-Wan and Siri!" Qui-Gon exclaimed. "Could they have been taken there by mistake?"

"It's possible," V-Nen said. "We hear that the Truant Guides take action first and ask questions later. And they might not believe your Padawans if they say they are not from Kegan. There are very few citizens who know the Jedi are here. O-Vieve and V-Tan thought it best if your arrival was kept secret."

"You see, we contacted you without V-Tan and O-Vieve's permission," O-Melie said. "We took the chance that our Benevolent Guides would not dare refuse the Jedi. They did not. They allowed you to come. But they would not let us see you alone."

"They claim it is for our protection," V-Nen told them. "They believe that darkness surrounds the Jedi."

Qui-Gon was startled. "I don't understand."

"O-Vieve has prophetic visions," O-Melie explained. "V-Tan has dreams. Many of their predictions have come true. That is why the people of Kegan trust them. O-Vieve had a vision of the Jedi. She claims that an evil force will engulf those who are close to the Jedi. All Keganites are afraid of the Jedi."

So Adi was right. That was what she had picked up from V-Haad and O-Rina. Fear.

Jude Watson

"But we doubt O-Vieve's vision," V-Nen said. "We want what's best for our daughter. We had to contact you. We know Lana wasn't taken for routine testing. We would have heard something by now."

A sob broke loose from O-Melie.

V-Nen put his arm protectively around his wife. He laid his hand on her hair, holding her head against him gently. He spoke with his cheek resting against her hair. "I'm sorry to say these things out loud, Melie, but I know you are thinking them, too. We must be strong for Lana's sake. We must allow the Jedi to help us. We can't do it alone."

Slowly, O-Melie raised her head. Tears sparkled in her eyes. "Nen is right," she said shakily. "We need your help."

"And we are here to give it," Qui-Gon said.

V-Nen put his hand on Qui-Gon's forearm. O-Melie put hers on Adi Gallia's.

V-Nen said, "Now we are Nen and Melie to you. Our fate is twined with yours."

"We will find your daughter," Qui-Gon assured them.

"You must be careful," Nen told them. "We are part of a faction on Kegan that opposes O-Vieve and V-Tan. We believe that the isolation policy is wrong. Trade and exploration could be good for Kegan. The surveillance is what has made our anti-isolationist movement so difficult. It's not that we are arrested or forbidden to discuss things - on the contrary, V-Tan and O-Vieve insist that Kegan is an open society. Yet somehow those of us who ask why we cannot travel beyond Kegan are punished - moved to job sectors we do not like, forced to share housing unexpectedly, given low priority for requests ... things that make life difficult on Kegan. You may imagine that the movement has thus lost many members. The rest have learned to be careful."

"But now they have gone too far. They have taken our daughter," Melie said. "I do not want to be careful any longer."

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"V-Tan and O-Vieve have said that if one Keganite leaves the planet it will cause our destruction," Men continued. "They will prevent Lana leaving in whatever way they can."

"We must find her before it's too late," Melie said, her voice trembling.

"Yet every move is watched. Every word we say is heard," Nen added in despair.

"I have an idea," Qui-Gon said. "Auto-hoppers are controlled by CIPs - Central Instruction Processors."

"Yes," Nen agreed. "The CIP is in a guarded building right here in the Comm Circle."

"If Adi and I can disable the CIP, they will need to recall the autohoppers until it is repaired. In the meantime, the people will be able to share information more freely. You will be able to mobilize your group, and we will have time to search for Lana."

"Qui-Gon, I must speak to you," Adi said sternly.

She drew Qui-Gon into the corner.

"I must object to this plan," she said in a low tone that vibrated with worry. "It is totally opposed to the Council's wishes. We will directly interfere with the Kegan government if we disable a CIP."

"But how else can we complete our mission?" Qui-Gon argued. "We didn't know before we arrived that the people here were under constant surveillance. We didn't know that two powerful rulers were controlling them. And our Padawans and an innocent child weren't missing!"

Adi pressed her lips together. She cast her eyes on the floor, thinking.

"Adi, we must find them," Qui-Gon said softly. "This is the only way."

Adi raised her head. Her deep brown eyes still were clouded by doubt. She did not speak.

"I understand if you don't wish to help me," Qui-Gon said firmly. "But I will disable that CIP. The question is, will you come with me?"

Chapter Eleven

Davi, Obi-Wan, and Siri sat in a dark corner of the food hall.

"What are we waiting for?" Siri whispered to Davi.

"Lockdown," Davi said. "The lights will go on and off three times. The Security Guides will change shifts. V-Tarz is on tonight. He'll sit at the surveillance post in the admin center. If anyone steps foot out of the dorm quads, an alarm will sound."

"So how will we escape?" Siri asked.

"V-Tarz waits five minutes after lockdown, then turns off security in Quad 7 and raids the kitchen," Davi said with a grin. "I found this out the night I met Scurry." He placed the ferbil on his palm and fed it a few seeds. "Scurry was in the food prep area. He must have gotten in somehow and couldn't find his way out. I knew if they found him he'd be ... gotten rid of. I was trying to figure out how to keep him when the lockdown warning came. I decided to spend the night where I was. It's six punishment marks if you're caught out after lockdown. V-Tarz came in for a snack, so I hid."

"How do you know he does it every night?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Because you can see the security light blink off in the dorm," Davi explained. "I come out here almost every night. Sometimes I'm ... I'm afraid to be alone in the dark."

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"But you sleep in a room with twenty other boys," Obi-Wan said.

"I'm still alone," Davi said. Embarrassed, he looked down quickly to pet the ferbil.

"Listen, I know what you mean," Siri said bluntly. "This place could give anyone the wild shivers."

Davi looked up with a shy smile. Once again, Siri's forthright manner had reassured him, Obi-Wan noted. He would never have imagined that Siri was capable of comforting anyone.

"Scurry helps," Davi said. "And my other pets. I find them in the yard during rec period. Most of them are hungry or scared or hurt. I smuggle them in and keep them by my bed. At night I sneak in here to get food for them. Sometimes I sneak outside just to see the stars."

"How do we get out?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Through the windows in the cleansing room of Quad 7," Davi said. "You can use the shower heads to swing up. It's an easy drop to the ground. Then you'll have to steal a landspeeder. I can give you the coordinates of the city."

The lights turned on and off three times. A soft signal sounded.

"In another five minutes, the floor will be alarmed," Davi whispered. "But then V-Tarz will turn it off again. I'll show you the way."

"Why don't you come with us, Davi?" Siri asked.

Davi shrank back. "Why would I do that?"

"Don't you want to find out what's really happening in the galaxy?" Siri asked. "Don't you want a chance to do what you want to do?"

"But the galaxy is a dangerous place," Davi said.

"Some of it is dangerous," Obi-Wan said. "Not all."

"There are places on Coruscant, where we live, that place orphan children with parents," Siri told him. "You could have a family. You could keep pets and work with animals."

Jude Watson

"I have a family," Davi said nervously. "The General Good is a family."

"But Davi, The Learning is telling you lies," Siri said. "Don't you trust us?"

"It's not that I don't trust you," Davi said worriedly. "But the power of evil that controls the galaxy might be telling you things that aren't true. Misinformation is spread to confuse the people and keep them in line."

"But that's exactly what's happening *here*," Siri protested.

"If I leave, the Masked Soldiers will come and attack Kegan," Davi said, shaking his head. "This is the vision of O-Vieve and V-Tan. No one must leave. The General Good will suffer, and invaders will come."

Siri and Obi-Wan exchanged a frustrated glance. Davi had been trained in The Learning for too long. He could not accept what they told him as true.

They heard the heavy tread of V-Tarz. The massive Keganite moved through the food hall, heading for the kitchens. Obi-Wan stayed perfectly still. In only a few minutes, he and Siri would be free.

If everything went according to plan ...

A voice suddenly split the silence. "V-Tarz!"

Another Security Guide stood in the doorway. "What are you doing?"

"Security alert in the kitchens," V-Tarz said quickly. "Probably just a malfunction. Maybe the infrared alarm. I was just checking it out."

"I'll go with you. New orders are for two posted guards during the lockdown hours. We'd better get Quad 7 back online quickly." The other Guide moved toward V-Tarz.

"There goes V-Tarz's snack," Siri murmured.

"We'd better get back to our dorm quarters," Davi said nervously. "We won't be able to escape tonight. I'm sorry. They've never put two guards on at night before."

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They waited until the Guides had turned the corner. Then Davi led them out of the food hall.

"We can get back to the dorms through the admin center," Davi said. "Hurry, it won't take them long to check out the kitchen security."

They raced through the halls and entered the admin center, a round room that was in the center of the building. All the different quads spun off from this central location.

"Almost there," Davi said as he hurried toward the door that led to the Quad 7 dorm, where they were all quartered.

But just then they heard familiar footsteps behind them. There wasn't enough time to make it to the door. Quickly, Davi sprang behind a row of desks. Siri hurried after him. Obi-Wan was bringing up the rear. He slipped behind a wall of shelves that held data files.

They could hear V-Tarz grumbling as he moved toward the security wall.

"Run the infrared check, he says," he muttered. "There's nothing wrong with the infrared. What's wrong is that I'm starving."

"V-Tarz? Are you there?" The voice came through the comlink on the console.

"I'm here."

"Run check."

"Running," V-Tarz said. "You idiot."

"What?"

"Nothing. Running check." V-Tarz's stomach rumbled. He sighed.

Obi-Wan leaned against the console to peer around it. Would they be able to slip past V-Tarz? Not if he didn't move. V-Tarz had a perfect view of the door they needed to pass through.

As Obi-Wan retreated back behind the shelves, he brushed against a container that was overstuffed with data files. One of them slipped off the top. Obi-Wan's reflexes were excellent, and he caught it soundlessly.

Jude Watson

It was a file for someone named O-Uni. Obi-Wan leafed through it quietly. The girl had excellent reports from her teachers. A few visits to the med circle. Then a paper stamped RECLASSIFIED TO RE-LEARNING CIRCLE.

Obi-Wan carefully replaced the file. The Re-Learning Circle? What was that?

"Check complete," V-Tarz said into the comlink. "No problems."

"Copy that. Making one last check of kitchen and food hall before I get back."

"I'll give you a hand."

"Don't bother. I've got it covered."

"Didn't copy that. I'll check the kitchen." V-Tarz switched off the comlink. "Maybe I can sneak some veg patties when you're not looking, killjoy."

He lumbered off. Davi immediately poked his head out.

"Let's go," he hissed.

They hurried toward the door, but Obi-Wan stopped Davi for a moment. "What's the Re-Learning Circle?"

"I'm not sure," Davi said. "But I know I don't want to end up there. You get sent there if you have enough punishment marks. But then some kids who are never in trouble get sent there, too. Nobody knows why." He shuddered. "But nobody ever comes back."

Chapter Twelve

The morning gong shattered the silence before dawn. Instantly, students threw back their covers and stood, lining up to use the wash basins that ran along the wall.

Obi-Wan felt the shock of cold water against his skin. His mind was already clear. The next gong sounded, the signal to dress and proceed to the food hall within three minutes. Davi had explained what was required last night before they'd separated.

Obi-Wan reflected how different life at the Temple had been. There, a soft light began slowly and grew in brightness, mimicking a rising sun. The students all had their own quarters, as privacy was respected. Early morning was a time of meditation and gentle exercise before the day began. It was not harsh noise and hurry.

Here the students did not seem to mind the abrupt start of the day or the strict schedule they had to follow. They did not seem to notice the contrast between the smiles of the Guides and their sharp orders. And nobody seemed to mind the food.

Across the room, Siri sat with the other girls. She lifted a spoonful of grain mash and made a face at him. Obi-Wan laughed quietly to himself.

Jude Watson

"Two punishments marks, V-Obi," one of the Guides said, entering it into a touch pad. "Concentration on nutrition is what we do during meal service. Interaction with others is saved for free time."

Obi-Wan chewed on the tasteless meal. Siri was right. They had to get out of here.

"Today we will play Response Time," O-Bin announced. "You all know how this is done. A topic will flash on your screen. Whoever hits their response button first will tell the class what the significant facts about the topic are. Good luck."

Obi-Wan glanced at his data screen. CORUSCANT flashed across it. He did not hit his response button. The best thing he could do today was try not to attract any attention from the Teaching Guides.

Jedi responses are lightning fast. The light on top of Siri's data screen lit up first. Obi-Wan threw her a warning glance, but she ignored it.

O-Bin was clearly not pleased at having to call on Siri. "O-Siri?" she asked through pursed lips.

"Coruscant is a world made up of one city. It is the home of the Galactic Senate. Billions of beings live on Coruscant. It is known for government and culture and its excellent transit and security systems -"

"I must interrupt you, O-Siri," O-Bin said with a smile. "That is all wrong. Can anyone correct O-Siri?"

Data screen lights glowed throughout the classroom. O-Bin consulted her screen to see who had been first. "V-Mina?"

"Coruscant is a world of corruption," V-Mina said. "Slavery is legal there."

"Precisely," O-Bin said.

Siri's face was burning. Obi-Wan fixed her with a steady gaze. They both had to keep quiet. They should not attract any more attention.

JEDI ORDER.

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This time, O-Bin deliberately ignored Siri's glowing light. "V-Taun?"

"The Jedi Order is surrounded by darkness. They -"

Siri sprang to her feet. "The Jedi path is one of service to the galaxy!"

"Sit down, O-Siri! Five punishment marks! And you know what that means ..."

Obi-Wan groaned loudly.

"Food service cleanup after the evening meal," O-Bin hissed through her teeth. "And V-Obi, from your groan I'm sure you'll be happy to join O-Siri. So much better for the General Good."

"I *am* capable of keeping my mouth shut," Siri told Obi-Wan later. "I just don't want to. What difference does it make if we're washing dishes? At least we're not sitting in a class listening to O-Bin tell us that the Core Worlds are corrupted."

Obi-Wan regarded the stack of dishes crusted with the remains of the evening meal. It was the second time they had been given cleanup duty that day. "I think I'd rather be sitting in class."

"I have a suggestion." Siri threw the dishrag into the sink. "Let's forget the dishes and escape. Tonight. If we can't outsmart that greedy V-Tarz, we don't deserve to be Jedi."

"All right," he agreed.

"Obi-Wan, you've got to listen to me sometime. You're not the only one who can -" Siri did a double take. "Did you just agree with me?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "You're right. We saw how the security system operates. Let's do it. Qui-Gon and Adi must be really worried now."

"There will be two guards," Siri said. "And V-Tarz might not be able to go for his snack. What do you have in mind?"

"The other Security Guide thinks the system malfunctioned last night, but they don't know where the problem is, right?"

Siri nodded.

Jude Watson

"So let's create a real problem," Obi-Wan said. "They'll have to shut down the system to check and repair it. Meanwhile we'll sneak out the cleansing room window."

"How can we sabotage the system?" Siri asked. "We can't sneak into the admin center now. It's full of Guides."

"We have to sabotage it here," Obi-Wan said, glancing around the kitchen. "Any ideas?"

They examined the security devices set into the ceiling corners.

"Didn't V-Tarz say something about the infrared sensor?" Siri asked.

"He claimed that it could be malfunctioning," Obi-Wan said.

"Can we rig something to set it off again?" Siri asked. She ran her hand along the big warming unit. "What if we turned the stoves on low? They'd heat the room and eventually the infrareds would go off. They'd have to turn off the system to figure it out."

"Simple, but genius," Obi-Wan said. "Let's do it. But we'd better wash the dishes first. If a Guide comes in to check our work, he or she might notice the stoves are on."

"I knew there was a drawback," Siri groaned.

Working quickly, the two finished their task. The warning lights flashed for lockdown, and they ran for their dorm quarters. They paused outside the admin center.

"We don't have time to say good-bye to Davi," Siri said in concern.

"He'll know what happened when he finds out we're gone. We can come back for him with Qui-Gon and Adi. Meet me here as soon as the security light goes out," Obi-Wan said. "Then we'll head for the Quad 7 exit."

Siri nodded. Obi-Wan headed to his dorm quarters. He managed to slip into bed just before the lights went out. He waited, listening to the breathing slow around him. The students worked so hard and long during the day that everyone fell deeply asleep within minutes of lying down.

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At last the security light blinked off. Obi-Wan slipped into his boots and tiptoed out. He hesitated near Davi's sleep couch. It was better not to awaken him. Anything could go wrong, and he didn't want to get Davi in trouble.

When he reached the hall outside the admin center, Siri was waiting.

"I just saw V-Tarz and the other Security Guide take off to check that sensor," she said. "It's all clear."

They hurried down the long hallway, past the other dorm rooms. The cleansing room was at the very end of the long, circular building. They had almost reached it when they heard the scrape of a door opening slightly.

Without hesitating a fraction, Obi-Wan and Siri leaped together toward the curve of the hallway, where they would be out of sight. They hit the floor and began to run. If someone had caught a glimpse of them, or even merely heard them, Security Guides might be called. Each student was encouraged to inform on the others.

But would they?

An alarm pierced the silence. The door to the cleansing room was in sight. They raced toward it. But before they could reach it, Security Guides spilled out into the hallway and surrounded them.

They could have fought them. But that meant they would have to draw their lightsabers. Obi-Wan was still reluctant to do that, since Yoda had cautioned them against it. There had to be a better way. He saw Siri's hand drift to her lightsaber hilt, and he shook his head. But would Siri listen to him?

Students spilled out into the hall to see what had caused the disturbance. O-Bin and several other Teaching Guides hurried out, dressed in their sleepwear.

"I know these two well," O-Bin said. "What are you doing out in the hallways after curfew?"

A shaky voice came from behind them. "It was me."

Jude Watson

They turned. Davi stood nervously, his eyes on the floor, afraid to look at O-Bin.

"I was heading for the food prep area," Davi said. "I... forgot something."

"I'll say he did!" V-Tarz hurried forward. "He left all the stoves on! Tripped the sensors!"

O-Bin plastered her chiding smile on her face. "This is very careless of you, V-Davi. We will have to consult to figure out how many punishment marks you will receive."

"I know," Davi mumbled. "I realize that I endangered the General Good. I am repentant."

"Well. We shall discuss this tomorrow." O-Bin clapped her hands. "Everyone return to your quarters."

Amid the crush of students, Obi-Wan and Siri made their way to Davi.

"Why did you do that?" Siri whispered.

"I don't have as many punishment marks as you," Davi whispered back.

"Davi, why are you wearing your boots and outer tunic?" Obi-Wan asked shrewdly.

"I saw you leave," Davi said. "I knew you were going to escape. I wanted to come with you!"

"V-Davi!" O-Bin's voice was shrill. "If you want to repent for your disobedience, you should not be talking to two troublemakers!"

With a last glance at them, Davi backed up. But suddenly something shot out of his pocket. Obi-Wan knew immediately what it was: Davi's pet ferbil, Scurry. Davi would not leave the Learning Circle without his pet.

"What is that?" O-Bin snapped. "Catch it!"

Davi went down on his hands and knees. He made a chirping noise with his mouth and cupped his hands. The ferbil ran into his palm.

"That," O-Bin said, "is a pet."

Davi said nothing. His face flamed.

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"It's just a little ferbil," Siri said.

"Two punishment marks, O-Siri. I was not talking to you. V-Tarz!"

V-Tarz rumbled forward. "Please search V-Davi's dorm area," O-Bin ordered.

Obi-Wan and Siri followed. While the students stood around, it did not take V-Tarz long to find two iridescent lizards, another baby ferbil, and a bag of seeds.

O-Bin pressed her lips together. "What do we say, students?"

All the students faced Davi.

"SHAME. SHAME. SHAME," they repeated over and over.

"Take ... those ... things," O-Bin told V-Tarz, her teeth clenched in a smile. "And get rid of them."

V-Tarz scooped up the lizards and put both ferbils in his pocket.

"No!" Davi cried. "Please..."

"SHAME. SHAME. SHAME."

Inside V-Tarz's pocket, the ferbils chirped anxiously.

Davi's eyes filled. Tears slowly dripped down his cheeks. "Please," he whispered.

As soon as the lights powered up the next morning, Obi-Wan hurried to Davi's sleep couch to give him words of encouragement. They would find a way out. They would take him with them.

But Davi was gone.

Chapter Thirteen

Qui-Gon and Adi hid behind a low wall, their eyes on the high security building that housed the CIP. Nen had brought them through several checkpoints, but he was not authorized to enter the building. It was up to them to get past the guards.

"We cannot attack any Keganite," Adi murmured. "We must use the Force to bypass security."

"There is only one guard," Qui-Gon said. "It should be easy. Kegan is not used to unlawful activity."

They rose from their hiding place and strolled toward the guard.

"Greetings," Qui-Gon said. "V-Tan and O-Vieve have sent us here to observe. You will be happy to let us pass through."

"I am happy to let you pass through," the guard said, succumbing to the mind trick and waving them through the doorway.

Once they were inside, Qui-Gon and Adi quickly found the Central Instruction Processor. Adi's fingers flew at the keyboard as she entered a series of contradictory instructions.

"This should send them all to landing sites," she said. "I don't want them to crash in a populated area. This program should confuse the tech personnel and give us time."

"How long?" Qui-Gon asked.

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Adi's eyes never left the data screen. "Hard to say. It should give us at least two hours. Maybe three. They aren't technologically advanced, so it could take them a while."

"I don't want another night to fall without finding our Padawans," Qui-Gon said grimly.

Adi agreed quietly. "We will find them. And Lana, too."

When Adi was finished, they turned toward the exit hallway, but Qui-Gon stopped by a door marked CENTRAL INSTRUCTION FILE RECORDS.

"Let's just look in here a minute," he said. "We could find a clue."

The room was lined with holographic file units. They were dated and lined up alphabetically. Qui-Gon accessed a drawer of files, Adi another.

"There's a file on every citizen of Kegan here," Adi Gallia said in disbelief. "Recorded conversations ..."

"Whom they meet, whom they dine with ..." Qui-Gon said, accessing another file.

"What they use, what they eat..."

"What they write to their children at school..."

Qui-Gon studied a file for a thirteen-year-old named O-Nena. "Didn't Nen tell us about The Learning Circle?"

Adi Gallia murmured assent as she accessed another file. "Did you find out where it is?"

"No," Qui-Gon said. "But here's a reference to a *Re*-Learning Circle. What could that be?"

"Sounds like something to check out."

"Let's look up Lana," Qui-Gon suggested, flicking past files to get to her name. "There's nothing here."

"I'll try Melie and Nen." Adi searched through the files, flashing one name after another. "Here. I'll take Nen, you take Melie." She read through the files quickly.

Qui-Gon scanned the file. "Plenty of recorded conversations. Records of meetings with other dissidents. And record of all our

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conversations in their house. But nothing about Lana. Not even the recording of her birth."

"They've erased all the information." Adi met Qui-Gon's gaze. "I don't like this. It's as though they wiped out any evidence of her existence."

"Except in her parents' memories."

Simultaneously, the two Jedi closed the files.

"There's no time to lose," Adi said.

They left the building and hurried to Nen and Melie's dwelling. Adi quickly explained that the autohoppers would be grounded for about three hours.

"We'll gather as many dissidents as we can," Nen said. "We'll try to find out if anyone has seen your Padawans."

"We must find out where the Learning Circle is located," Qui-Gon told them. "I have a feeling the key is there. Have you ever heard of the Re-Learning Circle?"

"I've heard it mentioned," Nen said. "Nobody really knows what it is. Some sort of training facility."

"The mothers talk," Melie said. "They say if your child is reassigned they are not allowed to contact you again. Do you think that's where Lana is?"

O-Yani, the elder caregiver, stood in the doorway. "No," she whispered.

Melie turned, her gaze suddenly sharp. "O-Yani, your grandson V-Onin was sent to the Re-Learning Circle six years ago."

"It was not my fault he was ill," O-Yani said quickly.

"I know," Melie said gently. "I saw how you cared for him. Why was he taken away?"

"For the General Good," O-Yani said promptly.

"O-Yani, we have disabled the autohoppers," Qui-Gon said to her. "You don't hear them flying, do you? You can speak freely."

O-Yani paused. She looked out the window, waiting for the sight or sound of the autohoppers. "They gave me this job. I like working with children," she said wistfully.

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"You won't lose your job," Nen told her. "We know that what happened to Lana wasn't your fault."

"But if you know where she is, please tell us," Melie said.

"The medics didn't know how to treat V-Onin. They said they had a place for him to go ... a place where research was done. What could we do?" O-Yani's face was bleak. "I never saw him again."

"Do you know where they took him?" Melie pressed.

"A trader came one day and knocked on my door," O-Yani said. "He had seen a boy in the country who was traveling with Guides. The Guides had trouble with their airspeeder and were repairing it. The boy stopped the trader.

He gave him something to bring to me. A goodbye gift."

"What was it?" Nen asked.

"Wildflowers," O-Yani said. "I pressed them in a book. Wait."

She disappeared and came out a moment later with a leather-bound book. She cracked it open and carefully extracted a delicate, pressed bloom.

"May I see it?" Melie asked respectfully. At O-Yani's hesitant nod, she plucked it from her hand and examined it. "I know this bloom. It comes off the calla tree. They only grow on the highest plateau of Kegan. It's about two hours away by landspeeder."

Thanks to the Jedi's faster craft, they could cut that amount of time in less than half, Qui-Gon calculated. "How big is the plateau itself?" he asked.

"You could cover it in a matter of minutes with the right craft and surveillance devices," Melie answered. "It's not very large."

"Let's go," Qui-Gon said to Adi.

Suddenly the door flew open. Six Enforcement Guides stormed into the room.

"Qui-Gon Jinn and Adi Gallia, we are here to escort you to the High Court. You have been found guilty of mind control. Come quietly or you will be shot."

Chapter Fourteen

Siri used the bustle of departure from the food hall to drift close to Obi-Wan.

"Davi was taken to The Re-Learning Circle," she told him in a low voice. "I overheard O-Bin talking to another Teaching Guide. We've got to do something."

"I thought you wanted to escape," Obi-Wan said.

Siri bit her lip. "Not until we find Davi."

"I feel the same way," Obi-Wan agreed.

"I think the Re-Learning Circle is right here, in the Learning Circle itself," Siri told him.

"We have rec time today. Let's try to sneak away and explore then," Obi-Wan suggested. "Just don't cause trouble in class, or we'll have cleanup duty instead."

Siri nodded. They walked in orderly rows to class. The morning stretched on. Often O-Bin would glance at Siri during the lesson, waiting for her objection. But Siri remained silent, her face serene. Obi-Wan could feel members of the class wondering if O-Bin had won the battle and subdued her.

At last, classes ended and the students filed outdoors. Rec time consisted of running along a track that spanned a good part of the Learning Circle. Along the track various stations were set up for exercises that tested balance, coordination, and strength.

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They did not race against one other but against their own former times. Each student wore a sensor that recorded his or her progress after every lap. The sensors were connected to a large readout screen. The goal was to complete five circuits. Then they would be free to stroll around the part of the Circle set apart for outdoor activities.

Several classes ran the course at the same time. Teaching Guides supervised them, but they were more interested in drinking in the sun or talking among themselves than patrolling the students.

"Let's run the course as fast as we can," Obi-Wan suggested. "The sooner our five scores are recorded, the more free time we'll have."

Obi-Wan and Siri ran easily side by side. Within seconds, they were ahead of the pack. They reached the first station, a narrow beam suspended several meters above the ground.

The beam curved in a twisting shape in order to test balance. Without breaking stride, Siri, then Obi-Wan, leaped up on it, landed without wavering even a fraction, and lightly ran through its twists and turns without a pause. Siri leaped off the end, somersaulted, and landed. Obi-Wan followed her lead.

The next station was a durasteel wall that had small handholds and footholds to aid climbing. It glistened in the sun.

"I think it's coated to make it more slippery," Obi-Wan said to Siri as he raced alongside her. "Might be tricky to climb."

She grinned. "Why bother?"

Using the Force, Siri leaped and landed on top of the wall, then sprang off and flew through the air. Again, Obi-Wan followed. He landed on top of the wall and jumped down easily.

They were far ahead now. The track course was an easy exercise for them. They had been studying balance and coordination at the Temple from an early age. They rounded the first lap and their score was recorded. Soon they outran others still on their first lap.

Jude Watson

Around and around Siri and Obi-Wan ran. Students flooded the course, the faster ones in their second lap, the slower still on the first. It was easy to lose themselves in the crowd.

When they completed the fifth lap, they jogged easily along until they got to a part of the course that curved away from where the Teaching Guides sat on benches, enjoying the sun. Then they simply strolled away.

They noted utility sheds, more classrooms, Security Guide outposts, sleeping quarters for workers, supply sheds, and a landing platform. Nowhere did they see a building that could be the Re-Learning Circle.

"Maybe I was wrong," Siri said, discouraged. "But O-Bin clearly said that Davi packed his belongings and V-Tarz walked him there. They didn't take a speeder."

"We've covered most of the compound," Obi-Wan said. "The rest is just cultivated gardens and fields for food production."

Siri gazed over the fields. "Is quinto grain valuable on Kegan?" she asked.

"Not especially," Obi-Wan said. "It's Kegan's basic crop. It's the base for those veg patties that you love so much."

"If it's not valuable, why are ten Security Guides guarding it?" Siri asked.

Obi-Wan looked in the distance. Siri's sharp eyes had noted the Guides lined up in a field.

"Let's get closer," he suggested.

Using the field of grain as cover, they moved toward the Guides. When they got closer, they took out electrobinoculars from their utility belts.

The Guides stood ten paces apart. They looked bored. One of them yawned. Another stamped his feet.

"I don't see anything unusual," Siri said.

"Look at the dirt near the third guard, the one who stamped his feet," Obi-Wan said.

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Siri trained her electrobinoculars on the loose dirt that had been disturbed. "Something is buried there," she said excitedly. "I see metal."

"Hold on," Obi-Wan said. The ground was moving. The guard stepped quickly away as a panel slid open and a ramp leading downward was revealed.

A Kegan woman emerged, wearing the white tunic of a medic. The door closed behind her and she hurried down the path in the direction of the Med Dome.

"That's got to be it," Siri said. "But how can we break in? We have to find a way to activate that ramp."

"I know how to get in," Obi-Wan said. "It's all up to you. And it will be easy."

"Me? How?" Siri asked warily.

He grinned. "Just do what comes naturally."

Chapter Fifteen

Qui-Gon and Adi stood in the center of the coliseum. Opposite them was a circular table full of Keganites in red tunics. They were Judgment Guides.

"You have been found guilty of mind control in the case of O-Melie and V-Nen," an elder Keganite said. "The penalty is deportation. Your ship is fueled and ready. Escort starfighters will accompany you to the outer atmosphere."

Qui-Gon and Adi said nothing. They knew that V-Tan and O-Vieve were behind this. It would be wasted effort to argue. But that did not mean they would submit.

They were led to the landing platform by a platoon of Security Guides.

One of them spoke. "We have taken the liberty of disabling all weapons and defense systems. We wish you good travel."

A door hissed open, and V-Tan and O-Vieve appeared. They walked toward the Jedi, kind smiles on their faces.

"Before you leave, we wish to assure you that we mean you no harm," O-Vieve said.

"Where are our Padawans?" Qui-Gon asked.

"We think they were taken in a Truant Sweep," V-Tan answered. "We will locate them at the Learning Circle and send

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them back to Coruscant. We give you our personal assurance that this will be so."

"I'm sorry, that isn't good enough," Qui-Gon answered politely.

"You do not trust us. Yet you should." O-Vieve leaned closer to Qui-Gon and touched his shoulder reassuringly. Suddenly, her face drained of color. Even her bright blue eyes seemed to fade. She weaved unsteadily.

"Are you all right?" Qui-Gon asked, touching her hand. It was ice-cold.

O-Vieve dropped her hand from Qui-Gon's shoulder. "It is nothing. Sometimes I see things. They come without warning. This is why we've done what we have done. We only serve to protect our people."

"We agreed to your coming with friendship in our hearts," V-Tan said. "What we cannot tolerate is interference in our affairs. It disrupts the

General Good. You pushed the limits of what we were willing to give. Kegan is not interested in other worlds. We want to be left alone."

"You told the people that if one person left Kegan, the planet would be destroyed," Adi said. "Surely you don't believe that."

"But we do," O-Vieve said gently. "I have seen it."

"We understand your concern," Qui-Gon said. "And we recognize your right to evict us. But you must know that if you force us to leave without our Padawans, we will return with an investigative team from the Galactic Senate. Kegan will no longer be able to isolate itself."

V-Tan and O-Vieve exchanged a nervous glance.

O-Vieve tucked her hands into the wide sleeves of her white tunic. "If you would indulge us, kind Jedi, and listen. I have seen visions of the future since I was a little girl. V-Tan has dreams in which he sees things, too. When we met each other, we discovered that our visions matched. That convinced us of the truth of them. We have predicted things that have taken place.

Jude Watson

Now we see an invasion of evil on Kegan. We created a way of living that might avoid what we see."

"Everything we have done is to protect our citizens from a fate they cannot imagine," V-Tan said. "Perhaps some of our measures seem harsh, but they are only for the General Good."

"We have both seen flashes of a future destructive event on Kegan," O-Vieve told them. "We see evil cloaking our planet like a black cloud."

"How?" Qui-Gon asked. "When?"

"We do not know the answers to those questions," O-Vieve said. "That is the agony we live with. We are not sure how to prevent it. We only have clues. The Jedi ... the Jedi are involved."

"The Jedi?" Adi asked. "How?"

"We see the Jedi surrounded by darkness," V-Tan said. "That is all we know. The darkness comes from within them and then spreads to engulf them."

"Perhaps our destruction will come from an explosive device sent to destroy an entire planet without a shiver," O-Vieve said.

"There is no explosive device powerful enough to destroy a whole planet," Qui-Gon said.

"Not yet, perhaps," O-Vieve corrected softly, and Qui-Gon felt a shiver go up his spine.

"We see masked soldiers," V-Tan said. "We do not know who they are, or what they want. Only that they are evil. They will bring fear and suffering."

"But your visions could be wrong," Adi said.

"Visions sometimes are. The Jedi themselves are not unused to them. Yet we recognize that we can only see things that *may* be."

"That is why we act as we do." O-Vieve looked at Qui-Gon with an intense gaze. "If you could choose your death, Qui-Gon, wouldn't you rather die in peace and comfort than violently in battle, in shock and despair?"

Qui-Gon fixed her with an icy stare. "We are not allowed to choose our deaths."

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"And it is not up to you to choose what is best for your people," Adi said. "You say that each citizen has a vote. Yet you control the process. You monitor their thoughts and conversations. All because of a vision that may not come to pass. Is that fair? Is it fair to take a child from her parents based on a dream of an unnamed evil?"

O-Vieve looked away. Obviously, the question had disturbed her.

Qui-Gon took the opportunity to press the point. "Adi Gallia and I have seen your Tech Circle and your Med Circle. We have seen what you do have compared to what you *could* have. There have been advances in medicine and technology that could save your people suffering and hardship. Is it right to deny them?"

"We do not deny them," V-Tan said, shaking his head. "We save them."

"There must be some sacrifice in order to preserve the General Good," O-Vieve said, turning back to them. Her voice once again rang with firm authority. "This meeting is over. We will send your Padawans after you. We have a good ship, well-stocked, equipped with a hyper-drive for them. We send you good wishes on your journey." Her blue eyes suddenly held the glint of steel. "But if you try to remain in Kegan atmosphere, know this: Your ship will be blasted out of the sky."

Chapter Sixteen

Obi-Wan and Siri were able to slip back into the throng of students crowding around the large data screen while the stragglers completed the course.

O-Bin read the scores, her usual fixed smile on her face. It faltered.

"O-Siri and V-Obi, step forward."

Obi-Wan and Siri stepped forward.

"You have tampered with the data screen," she rapped out. "Ten punishment marks apiece -"

"Excuse me, Guide O-Bin." The soft-spoken girl named O-Iris spoke up. "V-Obi and O-Siri completed the course that fast. I saw them leap up on the durasteel wall."

"And I saw them navigate the twisting beam in only three seconds," another boy said. "No one has ever done that."

"They were already through the first lap while I was only a third through the first," someone else said.

O-Bin's smile disappeared. She cleared her throat. "I see. Well. Let us see if O-Siri and V-Obi can match their skill on the rec course with obedience in class."

She walked off quickly. The students lined up to follow. Many glanced at Obi-Wan and Siri, speculation in their eyes. Obi-Wan had not foreseen that their prowess on the rec course would gain

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them more attention. Obviously, no one had ever run the course so fast.

Back in class, O-Bin began the lesson.

"Today we will cover the Kegan system of government as compared to other worlds. After studying other societies throughout the galaxy, V-Tan and O-Vieve have devised the best form of government. No one citizen on Kegan is more important than any other -"

"Really?" Siri said bluntly. "Then why do V-Tan and O-Vieve tell you what to think and what to do?"

"Three marks, O-Siri. You're amassing quite a collection," O-Bin said, her smile tight. "I suppose you enjoy kitchen duty."

"It sure beats sitting in class," Siri shot back.

This time, Obi-Wan heard a few students stifle a giggle.

"Two more marks," O-Bin said. "Getting back to the lesson, the freedoms we enjoy here on Kegan are unparalleled -"

Again, Siri interrupted. "Is that why all the children are confined to a walled compound and can't leave without triggering an alarm?"

"O-Siri!"

"And why aren't citizens free to travel off-planet?" Obi-Wan chimed in.

"V-Obi! Four marks for both of you!"

"But Guide O-Bin, they have a point," O-Iris said. "Can you address it?"

O-Bin's lips thinned. "No, I cannot. It is not a valid observation."

"It seems valid to me," V-Ido said hesitantly.

"And if we're free, why can't we choose what jobs we want to do?" another student asked.

"My father wanted to work in the Tech Circle, but was assigned to Traffic Control," someone said. "He hates it."

"They say they are not of our world," O-Iris said. "You call them liars. Yet we saw how they ran the course. No one on Kegan has that kind of skill."

Jude Watson

"That's enough!" O-Bin's face was red. She turned to Siri and Obi-Wan. For once, her anger was evident, not covered up with a bland, false smile. "This is all your fault!" she said shrilly. "Yours is not to question The Learning! It has been devised by those far wiser than you. It is taught by those who know more than you."

"Then you should be able to explain it," Siri pointed out.

"If we are so free, why can't we speak out?" O-Iris asked.

"Enough!" O-Bin shouted. She stabbed at a red button by the door. Seconds later, Security Guides burst in.

She pointed to Obi-Wan and Siri. "Take them away! They have disrupted my class! They are enemies of the General Good!"

Obi-Wan and Siri were pulled out of class and taken to the admin center. There, a stern Control Guide told them that because of their repeated disruptions, they were being reassigned.

Their destination was the Re-Learning Circle.

Obi-Wan and Siri exchanged a glance of satisfaction. It was exactly as they'd hoped.

They were marched across the yard and into the field, then down the ramp into the facility. Immediately, all air and light were blocked out. The Re-Learning Circle was dank and cold, the walls and floors the same shade of dull gray.

They were separated immediately. Obi-Wan was taken to a cell and locked inside. The light was dim. There was a mat on the floor to sleep on. That was all.

He did not know what he had expected. But he had not expected this.

Within minutes, his door hissed open. A Guide in a navy chromasheath tunic and pants walked in, a bundle in his arms.

"I am the Guide who will start you on the path of Re-Learning," he said. "Put this on." He held out a sensory-deprivation suit.

Obi-Wan knew he had to go along for now, until he could find Davi. He climbed into the suit and the Guide fastened it

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securely. He could not see or hear. The world around him dropped away. He could only hear his own breathing.

A lecture began in the padded earphones that covered his ears. He could not dislodge it no matter how he twisted. It was similar to the blackout hood he had worn at the Temple for the cooperation exercise. The difference was he could not remove this himself. He was trapped.

Kegan is a perfect society dedicated to the General Good. The Guides are here to help you. Do not trust others. Only trust your Guides.

The Inner Core worlds are full of dangers...

Travel is difficult and unnecessary...

Kegan medicine is the most advanced in the galaxy...

"Wrong!" Obi-Wan screamed despairingly. "It's all wrong!"

But he could not block out the voice.

Chapter Seventeen

Qui-Gon and Adi entered their transport. Adi took the controls. She coolly eyed their star-fighter escorts as she fired up the engines.

"Those are so old they should be junked," she said. "We won't have any problem outrunning them."

"Let's hope those laser cannons are just as old," Qui-Gon remarked mildly.

They rose smoothly and headed for the upper atmosphere, the starfighters flanking them closely. Adi was one of the best Jedi pilots Qui-Gon knew. Her response time was amazingly fast, and her feel for her craft was instinctive. If anyone could lose four starfighters without risking damage to their craft, it was Adi.

Because they knew one thing: They would not leave Kegan without their Padawans.

Qui-Gon had thought Adi too cautious at times during this mission. Now he saw how determined she could be.

"Ready for a ride?" she asked Qui-Gon.

He checked to make sure he was securely strapped in his seat. "Ready."

With one deft movement, Adi flipped the craft over, nearly clipping the wings of the starfighter next to it. She dived down at a screaming speed, then rolled several times. Trying to keep up,

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one starfighter spiraled out. The starfighter pilot fought to stabilize his craft.

"That model doesn't have the maneuverability this one does," she murmured. "Pity."

Adi pushed the engines to maximum speed and turned hard right, pushing the ship to the limits of its maneuverability. Warning blaster fire erupted off their port side, but Adi was already turning as she climbed, and it passed harmlessly by the wing. It ripped into the wing of the other starfighter, however. Flames erupted from its fuel line.

"Hoped that would happen," Adi muttered. The second starfighter took off, back down to the planet for repairs.

Now Adi reversed direction. Instead of trying to elude the two remaining ships, she headed straight for them. Thinking she was about to crash into them, both starfighters went into a dive and fired at the same time.

Adi was able to easily avoid the fire with a few quick turns. The starfighters were below them now, still diving. Adi pushed the engines to the maximum. They zoomed off and soon lost the two craft.

"Good flying," Qui-Gon complimented her. "And here I thought Yoda sent you on this mission just to watch over me. Maybe he knew we'd need your flying skills."

Adi threw him an amused glance from her dark, almond-shaped eyes. "Yoda didn't send me to watch you. Not in the way you think. Siri and I are a new team. He wanted her to see how a good Master-Padawan team operates."

"So Yoda isn't keeping an eye on us?"

"On the contrary. You and Obi-Wan have proven your effectiveness. Yoda felt Siri needed to learn cooperation with another Padawan as well."

Qui-Gon considered this. "I believe I learned the same lesson," he said softly.

Adi gave him one of her rare smiles. "And I as well."

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon plugged in the coordinates for Kegan's high plateau and they settled back for the short ride. Soon they zoomed over the targeted area. Mist shrouded the landscape below. Qui-Gon peered first at his data screens, then with his own keen gaze. The mist parted, and it appeared - a vast compound ringed with a high stone wall. Long, low-domed buildings lay within the larger compound as well as cultivated fields and open space.

"The mist is a good cover," Adi said. "I'll land outside the wall near those rocks."

They landed, concealing the ship behind a stand of rocks and scrub. They climbed out and quickly crossed a field and scaled the wall.

The mist lay low on the ground, so thick it was hard to see more than a short distance ahead. Qui-Gon and Adi patrolled the compound, letting their keen senses tell them when Guides were near. They moved like shadows through the fog.

They climbed on top of the buildings and looked through the skylights. They peered through every window. They found nothing.

"They aren't here," Adi Gallia said. "Maybe they were, and they moved them. No doubt O-Vieve and V-Tan have already sent out an alert for us. They know we'll head here. I think we should leave and consider our next step. Maybe we should head back to Kegan and see if Melie and Nen have come up with anything."

Qui-Gon paused. He lifted his head and closed his eyes. He felt the Force around him. He reached out to it, hoping it would tell him if his Padawan was near.

He felt nothing.

"All right," he said reluctantly. "Let's go."

Chapter Eighteen

At first he had struggled to block out the voice.

Trust the Guides to show you the way to the General Good. They monitor it. They know it. Trust them. Do not trust your friend or neighbor.

Then he realized that he should not struggle. That only made the voice more insistent. He practiced the Jedi way and accepted. The voice washed over him like water. He did not have to drink it in.

How long would this go on? It seemed to be lasting for hours. He could find his calm center; the voice would not penetrate. He knew Siri could do the same. They would not go crazy listening to that steady, melodic voice that told lie after lie.

But what about Davi?

At last he was released from the sensory-deprivation suit by his Guide. At first he could only blink. The soft noises of people and movement outside his door, the breathing of the Guide seemed loud and intrusive. Obi-Wan imagined that this was like being born.

"How long have I been here?" Obi-Wan asked.

"That I cannot say," the Guide said pleasantly. "Now it is time for the cleansing room. I'll lead you if you can't see quite yet. It's normal."

Jude Watson

"I can see." Obi-Wan's eyes were adjusting now. The gray walls and gray floors were like an extension of the darkness he had been plunged into for so many hours.

He walked next to the Guide down the corridors, passing a Medic Guide, this one different from the one he'd seen aboveground so many days before.

No. Today. I saw that Medic Guide earlier today.

He had to hold on to his sense of time. He would find a way to mark it in his room.

I won't be here that long. We came for Davi. We'll find him and get out.

They had come because they felt they owed Davi. They had come to help a friend. They had thought it would be easy to rescue him and get out. They were wrong. This would not be easy.

It had been impulsive, Obi-Wan realized. And he had promised himself back at the Temple that he would not be impulsive again. He would be careful.

Maybe he'd been influenced by Siri. She was always ready to jump, to move, to take action. He shouldn't have listened to her.

Do not listen to others. Listen only to the Guides.

Obi-Wan shook his head, blocking out the memory of the voice.

The Guide ushered him into the cleansing room. He pointed out the heating spray and cooling spray, towels, and a fresh tunic.

"I will be back in three minutes," he said.

Obi-Wan felt the pulse of the warm water against his back. He felt a sudden connection to the land above him, the living creatures, the beings around him. Qui-Gon was here. He was searching.

He knew it. He felt the strong, sure connection.

I'm here, Qui-Gon. I am below. Don't stop searching.

They had this connection once, but it had frayed. Would Qui-Gon hear him? Would he answer him?

He felt nothing.

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Obi-Wan moved to the cooling spray, then toweled himself off and dressed.

He was on his own. He could trust no one.

Only the Guides could be trusted for truth and ...

Obi-Wan stopped in the middle of buckling his utility belt. He had not heard those words as spoken by the voice in his ear. He had heard the words in his own voice.

Fear snaked through him. They had gotten to him in only one session.

Obi-Wan took a breath. He summoned up his training. He focused on the calmness within. It drove out the fear.

I am not alone, he told himself firmly. I have Siri. And I trust her.

Chapter Nineteen

Food service took place in a large hall filled with students. Obi-Wan could not see their faces. Like him, they wore concealing hoods. Strict silence was maintained. Security Guides patrolled the aisles between the long tables, making sure no one started a conversation.

The Learning Circle had been strict. Friendships were discouraged. If one student got too close to another, they would find themselves transferred to a different quad. But conversation was allowed at food times, and students did interact.

Here, everything was designed to break a student down. Isolation was the tool.

Obi-Wan tried to peer under hoods to see if Siri was looking for him. He searched for a small, slight form that could be Davi. He could not tell if either of his friends were here.

A harsh buzzer sounded, and there was a loud scrape of chairs against the floor as everyone stood, finished or not. Obi-Wan lined up with the others. How would he be able to make contact with Siri? He would have to find a way. Perhaps he could fake an illness. There seemed to be many med wards in this building ...

Ahead of him, his sharp eyes had caught a slight movement. A slender tail flicked out of a tunic pocket. The student quickly put a hand inside.

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Davi!

They marched down the long gray hallway in a row. One by one the students split off into separate cells. Obi-Wan kept his head down but his eyes fixed on Davi. He made a note of the cell Davi had disappeared into. There were no numbers on the doors, so he counted the doors until he got to his own.

He would contact Davi tonight. There was no time to lose. Davi was sensitive. He was afraid of being alone. What was this place doing to him?

And how would he find Siri? Obi-Wan pondered the problem. He would have to trust the Force to guide him. He could not delay any longer. He would use his lightsaber to cut through his cell door after lights out.

That night, he timed the regular stroll of the Security Guides. He calculated the distance down the hall. He would have just enough time to get Davi, pause inside his cell for the next patrol, then take off and look for Siri. It would be risky. He would have to count on the Guide to not notice the damaged cell doors. The lighting was low enough that he just might get away with it.

A buzzer announced lights out, and three seconds later his light was extinguished. Obi-Wan sat cross-legged on the floor of his cell. He would wait until he was sure that most students were asleep.

He had waited only a few minutes when a whisper came to him faintly.

"Obi-Wan! What are you doing? Catching a nap?"

"Siri?"

"Who do you think it is, V-Tarz? Stand back."

The glow of molten metal illuminated his room. Siri was cutting a hole in the door with her lightsaber. Obi-Wan sprang forward to help. Soon they'd cut an opening big enough for him to squeeze through.

Siri's bright eyes gleamed at him. "What were you waiting for? Are you starting to like it here?"

Jude Watson

By now Obi-Wan was used to her sense of humor. "Come on," he said. "I know where Davi is."

They hurried down the hallway. "I think Qui-Gon is somewhere in the Learning Circle," he said. "I feel it."

"I don't feel anything," Siri said. "But I don't have that kind of connection to Adi yet. Maybe someday we'll work together as well and you and Qui-Gon."

It was a backhanded compliment, but it was the first time she'd acknowledged that Obi-Wan had more experience than she did.

They reached Davi's door. Quickly, they cut a hole and climbed through. Davi rose on his elbows, shocked to see Obi-Wan and Siri climb into his cell.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered. "You'll get us all in trouble."

"It could get worse than this?" Siri asked, waving her lightsaber at the bare cell.

Davi didn't smile. He lowered back onto his sleep mat and curled into a ball. "I'm sure it could," he said. "Go away."

"Davi, you have to come with us," Obi-Wan said urgently.

"You have to trust us," Siri added.

"I only trust the Guides," Davi said. "They show me the way to the General Good. They monitor it. They know it. I trust them."

"That's the voice talking," Obi-Wan said.

"I do not trust my friend or neighbor," Davi whispered. "I trust the Guides." He looked at them pleadingly. "This is all I know. Please go away."

Siri stepped forward and sat on the floor next to Davi. "There are many things in the galaxy that are good, Davi. If Kegan let in the good things from outside, it would be a better place. Perhaps some of the illnesses you have here are now curable. Like the Toli-X Virus."

Davi rose on his elbows again. "B-but that is incurable. My parents died of it."

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"A cure was discovered shortly after the virus began to sweep the galaxy," Siri said gently. "If Kegan had been in touch with the rest of the galaxy, many would have been saved. I'm sorry to tell you this."

"I don't believe you." Davi shook his head back and forth. "The Guides don't lie. The Guides don't lie."

"Davi, why are there so many med facilities here at the Re-Learning Circle?" Obi-Wan asked him.

"Because the children cannot be cured," Davi said. "If they are in sight of others, it is bad for the General Good."

"If an animal was hurt, would you lock it away, or would you try to cure it?" Obi-Wan asked. "This place is wrong, Davi. You must know that."

Davi looked up at them, stricken.

"We are your friends," Siri said urgently. "We would not lie to you. You know that we come from another world. We have seen these things." She stood. "Will you come with us?"

Davi hesitated. Outside in the hall, they heard the footsteps of a guard. Would Davi turn them in?

They heard the footsteps walk by, then fade.

Davi stood. "I'm coming with you."

Obi-Wan and Siri reached out and each put a hand on Davi's forearm. They smiled at each other.

"Wait." Davi looked at them hesitantly. "Can I take Wali?"

Siri and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance. Rescuing someone else would take time and could endanger them. But they couldn't refuse Davi.

They nodded.

Davi squatted by the wall. Carefully, he eased out a stone from the wall. He plucked out a small furry creature and slipped it into his pocket.

"All right. I'm ready."

They moved quietly down the hall. Suddenly, a faint, mewing cry split the silence.

Jude Watson

"Davi, you have to make Wali be quiet," Obi-Wan advised him.

"That wasn't Wali," Davi whispered.

They heard the cry again. It was muffled, and Obi-Wan realized now that it came from one of the rooms off the hall. Then he felt it -

"It's a baby," Siri breathed.

"It's O-Lana," Obi-Wan declared.

Chapter Twenty

They were almost to the wall when Qui-Gon felt the surge in the Force. But all he saw was a field of green grain.

"They are here," he said to Adi.

She nodded. "I feel it, too. But where?"

Qui-Gon crouched down. He put his hands on the dirt. He closed his eyes. "Here."

He felt vibrations. Running footsteps.

"We've been spotted," Adi said.

They activated their lightsabers as the Security Guides thundered toward them. The Guides were armed with blasters.

The Guides were not used to skilled opponents. Qui-Gon and Adi used their lightsabers to deflect fire only. Working in perfect tandem, they flanked the guards and spun and evaded while they maneuvered them backward.

A utility shed stood at the edge of the field. Qui-Gon and Adi moved the Guides back toward it, step by step. The Guides stumbled, tried to rally, and fell back.

When they were almost to the shed, Qui-Gon circled around and opened the door. Then he leaped over the Guides to face them again. Together with Adi, he drove them into the shed. Then they closed and locked the door.

Jude Watson

"Now what?" Adi Gallia asked. "No doubt they are calling for help on their comlinks."

"We find the way in," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan and Siri quickly cut a hole in the door.

They found themselves in an infirmary. Children and young people lay on sleep couches. Some were hooked up to monitors. Others were attached to tubes. Some of them opened their eyes as the Jedi passed, only to stare at them dully. Obi-Wan wondered if they were given sleep potions.

O-Lana lay in a crib with high sides. Crying softly, she pulled herself to her feet when she saw Obi-Wan and Siri.

"You must not cry, O-Lana," Obi-Wan told her soothingly.

She stopped crying. Then she held out her arms and looked directly at Davi.

After a glance at Obi-Wan and Siri to make sure it was all right, Davi picked up the child and cradled her against his chest.

"I'll protect her as we go," he promised.

They hurried out of the infirmary and headed for the exit ramp. The next guard patrol was moments away.

But luck wasn't with them. They turned the corner and ran straight into a group of Security Guides about to change shifts.

Surprised, the Guides fumbled for their weapons. Obi-Wan and Siri activated their lightsabers. They glowed in the dim hallway, and the Guides stopped momentarily, even more surprised. They had never seen lightsabers before.

"Stay behind us, Davi," Obi-Wan ordered.

He and Siri moved forward. This time he knew she would not fight for herself. She would fight with him, for all of them.

Blaster fire pinged around them, and their lightsabers met it, a blur of speed and motion. They covered each other and leaped high, dropped to one knee, reversed direction, changed hands, all without pausing. Protecting O-Lana and Davi was their only objective.

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An alert sounded. One of the Guides must have activated it. The halls rang with a clanging alarm. Obi-Wan heard footsteps pound behind them. Soon they would be surrounded.

"This way," he called. He pushed Davi and O-Lana gently down an adjacent corridor.

The Guides followed, a mass of bodies in chromasheath armor, blasters firing. The small missiles fired by the beam tubes thudded into the walls around them. The air began to fill with smoke.

Obi-Wan and Siri pressed on. They could see the exit ahead. But Obi-Wan didn't know whether they could protect Davi and O-Lana, continue to fight the Guides, *and* activate the ramp. It would take time to figure out how the ramp was operated. There was most likely some sort of key or code. Their backs would be against a wall. Siri glanced over at him, and he knew she had thought of the same problems ahead.

More Guides suddenly appeared, running down an adjacent corridor. Obi-Wan felt sweat trickle down his back as he deflected a sudden burst of blaster fire. Would the battle end here? Would they have to surrender in order to save O-Lana and Davi?

Just then he heard a *whirr* and a clicking sound. The door slid open. A ramp shot up to the surface and fresh air flooded the hall. A split second later, Qui-Gon and Adi raced down the ramp, their lightsabers activated. With one quick glance they took in the situation, then leaped into the fray.

The Security Guides had gained confidence as their numbers increased. But four Jedi were too much for them. Their blaster fire was deflected back relentlessly. They had to keep diving to the floor or ducking behind carts to avoid it.

Finally, they simply dropped their weapons and ran.

The Jedi turned to one another. The battle was over. Obi-Wan took O-Lana from Davi's arms. He handed her to Qui-Gon.

"I bet you've been searching for this," he said.

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon looked over O-Lana's head at him. "I have been searching for you, too, Padawan. I am glad to have found you."

Chapter Twenty-One

When the citizens of Kegan found out what was happening in the Re-Learning Circle, they revolted. They were horrified that children were hidden away and put in solitary confinement for questioning authority or having a chronic ailment. It violated everything O-Vieve and V-Tan had claimed Kegan valued.

Every citizen packed the Gathering Circle to debate the problem. Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Adi, and Siri observed as V-Tan and O-Vieve were voted out as Benevolent Guides. A new council was swiftly appointed. Soon debate raged regarding travel outside Kegan. At last a vote was taken. A majority favored sending an envoy to the Galactic Senate. In the meantime, they would petition the Galactic Senate to send medical and scientific advisors to the planet to bring Kegan up to date.

Soon after, the Learning Circle was closed.

Students returned home to their families. They were given a short vacation until a new schooling system could be set up. People opened their homes to the orphans from the Re-Learning Circle, and the rest returned to their parents.

It was time for the Jedi to leave. They stood with Nen, Melie, and Davi at the landing platform. Melie handed Lana to Siri.

Jude Watson

"Nen and I have decided that it is best for Lana to go," she said, tears in her eyes. "I have seen what the Jedi are and what they can do. We must honor her gift."

"O-Vieve and V-Tan were right about many things," Nen said, touching his daughter's cheek. "One of them is that we must sacrifice for the General Good. It is better for Lana, better for the galaxy, if she is able to be taught completely."

"We shall care for her and honor her," Adi Gallia said. "She will grow wise in the ways of the Force, and her life will be one of service."

"I can ask for no better life for my daughter," Melie said.

Nen put his arm around Davi. "And a new child has come into our lives. Davi has agreed to stay with us."

"If he can stay away from the Animal Circle," Melie teased. "Our friend Via works there. She is teaching him how to care for the animals."

"I will never forget you," Davi told Obi-Wan and Siri shyly.

Obi-Wan put his hand on Davi's forearm. "We will always be your friends, Davi."

"If you ever need us, you have only to summon us," Siri told him.

"Safe journey," Nen said. "We are grateful to the Jedi for working to restore our world to justice."

Nen, Melie, and Davi walked away. Siri brought Lana into the ship to settle her in for the journey. Adi went inside to do her last-minute checks.

Obi-Wan took a last look at Kegan from the landing platform. "This world was a puzzle to me," he said. "I still don't understand how an entire planet could place its trust so blindly in visions and dreams."

"I'm not surprised," Qui-Gon said. "All living beings find comfort in a truth that makes their lives easier to bear. Here on Kegan the people did not have the strife or hunger that we've seen on other planets. Why should the people question a system that brought them ease and comfort?"

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"But their freedom was an illusion," Obi-Wan argued.

"We do not know if O-Vieve and V-Tan's visions were wrong, Padawan," Qui-Gon said thoughtfully. "O-Vieve's vision of the future was clouded, but that doesn't make it invalid. Perhaps she just misinterpreted what she saw."

"That I don't believe," Obi-Wan said. "I can't imagine one central evil controlling the whole galaxy. That would be impossible."

"I hope we do not see it, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "But we cannot say it is impossible. Haven't you experienced enough of chance and evil in the galaxy to realize that?"

Obi-Wan shook his head stubbornly. "She saw darkness coming from the Jedi itself. That could never happen."

Sun suddenly burst through the clouds overhead, dazzling Qui-Gon's sight. The glare caused Obi-Wan's features to blur and dissolve. For a moment, Qui-Gon didn't see the boy. He saw an elder man, alone, living on a desolate planet, his only companions his dark memories.

Qui-Gon felt the same shiver he'd experienced in O-Vieve's presence. Did he just have a vision of himself as an elder? Was that the dark vision O-Vieve had seen for him?

Then a sudden truth pierced him. *That isn't me. It is Obi-Wan.*

Or was it?

The sun retreated behind the clouds. The world became clear again. Qui-Gon studied Obi-Wan. He saw the familiar boyish features, the shining eyes. He found reassurance in the sight of his youth. *The future is not fixed, but fluid*, he told himself. Visions did not have to come true.

"Qui-Gon, are you all right?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Perhaps we should not speak of evil and darkness just as we've completed a successful mission," Qui-Gon suggested lightly. "Let us enjoy this moment. Justice has returned to Kegan."

"And if darkness lies ahead of me, I will fight it," Obi-Wan resolved.

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon put a hand on his shoulder. "We will fight it together, Padawan."

Book Ten
The Shattered Peace

Chapter One

Obi-Wan Kenobi peered through the dense cloud cover, hoping to catch a glimpse of the surface of the planet Rutan. All he saw was a thick gray mist that swirled around the starship, forming tiny droplets that trickled down the viewport.

He stretched out his legs impatiently. He was anxious to arrive on the planet and start the mission. It had been a long journey from Coruscant — his muscles felt cramped and he longed for fresh air. Their small starship, on loan from the Senate, had needed repairs, which had added a full day to their journey.

Noting his restless movement, his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, glanced at him. "Control your impatience, Obi-Wan," he remarked. "The mission begins before it starts, when we can prepare for what lies ahead."

Obi-Wan suppressed a sigh. Qui-Gon was a Jedi Master, and his wisdom was legendary. His advice usually made sense after Obi-Wan thought about it a moment. But sometimes it could be difficult to follow. Especially when he had been sitting in a transport for three days, waiting to get somewhere.

Qui-Gon gave him a short smile. The good thing about Obi-Wan's Master was that even while he chided Obi-Wan's impatience, he understood it as well.

Jude Watson

"So let us review what we know about the mission ahead," Qui-Gon suggested. "Information is preparation. What do we know about the history of Rutan and Senali?"

"Senali is an orbiting satellite of Rutan," Obi-Wan recited, remembering the information Jedi Master Yoda had provided them back on Coruscant. "Now it is a separate world with its own government, but it was a colony of Rutan for many years. The two worlds fought a long and difficult war that took its toll on both populations. The war was won by the satellite Senali in a surprising upset."

Obi-Wan stopped as his attention swerved and memory took over. Months ago, he had been involved in a civil war on the planet of Melida/Daan. In that conflict, the side with fewer weapons and lesser power had won, surprising not only the other side, but the galaxy. He knew firsthand how resolve and cunning could win out over superior forces.

"And what happened after that?" Qui-Gon prompted, breaking into his thoughts.

"Since the war was devastating to both worlds, a unique peace agreement was decided upon. The firstborn children of the rulers of both Rutan and Senali are exchanged when each child reaches seven years of age. The child is brought up on the neighboring planet, but is allowed to receive visitors and go for short visits to his or her home planet, as well as be in contact with the royal family. This is so that he or she does not forget his or her birth family or duty."

"And what happens when the child is sixteen?" Qui-Gon prompted.

"The child is allowed to return to his or her home planet in order to be groomed for leadership," the thirteen-year-old Padawan answered. "Another member of the ruling family takes his or her place until the next generation is born."

"It's an interesting solution to the problem of maintaining peace between two old enemies," Qui-Gon mused. "The thinking is that the leader of each world will not attack a planet where his

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or her child is residing. But the plan has a flaw that the rulers didn't take into account."

"What is that?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Feelings," Qui-Gon answered. "Loyalties are formed in your heart, not born in you. Emotion can't be ruled. Both leaders thought that if their children were with them for their first seven years, that would ensure their loyalty. But one can be loyal to one's home planet and yet want a different life."

"Like Prince Leed," Obi-Wan said. "He has lived on Senali for almost ten years. He does not want to return to Rutan."

Again, Obi-Wan thought back to his experience on Melida/Daan. He had wanted to join that society and live there. But even though he had made the choice to do so, he had not given up his loyalty to the Temple. Others had not seen it that way. He sensed that he would understand the torn feelings of Prince Leed.

"Or at least Leed *claims* he wants to stay on Senali," Qui-Gon amended. "That's what we're here to find out. His father believes the Senali are forcing him to stay. That's why the Senate fears that the two worlds will go to war again."

The mist began to break into patches of cloud. A large city appeared beneath them.

"That must be Testa, the capital city," Qui-Gon said. "The royal grounds of the king are on the outskirts."

Suddenly a warning light flashed on the control panel.

"I was afraid of this," Qui-Gon murmured. "Thanks to our detour, our fuel is very low."

He guided the craft closer to the planet's surface. They left the city behind and began to glide above a field of stubby, straw-colored grass. A warning alarm pinged.

"We're losing fuel fast. I can't make it to the royal landing platform," Qui-Gon said. He checked the coordinates. "If we land on this field, we won't be far from the palace. We're close enough to walk."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan flicked the controls that would prepare the ship for landing. Qui-Gon headed for level ground and guided the transport to a smooth stop.

"Let's just take our survival packs," Qui-Gon suggested. "No doubt King Frane will refuel the transport for us and we can fly it to the landing platform later."

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon down the ramp. Together they struck out across the field. Obi-Wan enjoyed the sensation of being outside again. He inhaled the fresh scent of the grass and tilted his head back to catch the faint rays of the sun that managed to filter through the clouds and mist.

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stopped. "Do you feel it?" he asked.

Obi-Wan felt nothing. But he waited before answering. Qui-Gon's perceptions were usually sharper than his. His Master had a deep connection to the Force that united all things.

Then he felt it, too — a vibration in the dirt beneath his feet.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure," Qui-Gon said. He crouched and put a hand on the ground. "Not equipment. Animals."

Obi-Wan peered through the mist. Far away he thought he saw a cloud of dust rise from the field. The dry grass rippled, but there was no breeze. Then he picked out shapes through the mist. Galloping animals were heading toward them.

"They are running scared. It's a stampede," Qui-Gon said. He whipped his head around. "There's no time to find shelter, and we're too far from the trees. Run *with* them, Padawan. Do not let yourself fall or you'll get trampled."

"Run with what?" Now Obi-Wan could hear the pounding noise. "What are they?"

"Kudana," Qui-Gon said tersely. He scanned the air overhead. Dots that Obi-Wan had thought were birds suddenly dived and twisted like no birds Obi-Wan had ever seen. One of the dots zoomed toward them. It was a seeker droid. Obi-Wan saw an indicator light flash.

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"A hunt," Qui-Gon corrected as in one smooth movement he withdrew his lightsaber and activated it. "And now we are the prey."

Chapter Two

The kudana rose out of the mist, the noise of their hooves like thunder. They were beautiful animals, their bronze metallic skins highly prized throughout the galaxy. Their eyes rolled in fright, and they made a high-pitched sound that was close to screaming. Obi-Wan could smell their panic, but he was more concerned about their sharp hooves and powerful legs.

The seeker droid hovered ahead, a laser beaming down toward Qui-Gon. No doubt it was sending back coordinates of their location.

"Ready, Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon shouted over the noise. "Pick a kudana and run alongside it. Use the Force to reach out and connect. Then, if you can, ride one."

Obi-Wan began to run. Qui-Gon ran ahead of him, matching the animals' speed. He reached out to touch the nearest animal's flank, racing alongside it. Obi-Wan knew his Master was calling on the Force.

With a gigantic leap, Qui-Gon landed on the animal's back. While the animal bucked and twisted, trying to throw him, he slashed at the seeker droid with his lightsaber. Metal sizzled and the smoking droid fell to the grass. Qui-Gon leaned down and hugged the kudana's neck. It quieted, allowing him to ride.

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Obi-Wan didn't see any of this. He was busy trying to avoid the flashing hooves of the kudana around him. Their panicked attempts to avoid the laser beams caused them to veer and swerve. He quickly saw that if the seeker droids weren't disabled, he would be trampled.

He, too, reached out gently to the animal closest to him, feeling its muscles bunch and quiver. He leaped high and landed on his feet on the animal's back. Quickly, he settled astride the animal, picking up the animal's rhythm so he would not fall. He reached out and connected with the frightened mind of the animal, sensing which way it would move.

Keeping his balance, Qui-Gon swung his lightsaber overhead at the next seeker droid. He slashed it in two pieces.

Obi-Wan held onto the silky mane of the kudana for a moment to get his balance, then leaped over the galloping animal to land on another. He swung his lightsaber as he jumped, and neatly cut another seeker droid in two.

The fourth seeker droid buzzed overhead, zooming forward to lock on Obi-Wan's position. Qui-Gon rode on a kudana by Obi-Wan's side, standing perfectly balanced and rocking with the movement of the animal's gait.

"I'll take care of it, Padawan!" he shouted. He reached up and demolished the seeker droid with a left-to-right swipe. Then he jumped off the kudana, keeping to the side of the pack. He motioned Obi-Wan to do the same.

Obi-Wan hit the ground and ran alongside the kudana. Now that they could not see the red lasers, the animals began to calm down. They ran easily, without the panic that had made them veer and shy. Gradually the animals surged ahead, and Obi-Wan found himself alone alongside Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon slowed his stride and turned off his lightsaber. "Well, Padawan," he said, "my guess is that our mission has begun."

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan tried to catch his breath. He felt the ground rumble underneath his feet once more. He and Qui-Gon turned at the same time. Clouds of dust rose in the distance.

"More kudana?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No," Qui-Gon said. "We have seen the prey. Now we'll meet the predators."

Soon Obi-Wan could distinguish creatures called huds coming from the distance. They were native to Rutan, four-legged creatures with black-and-red-striped coats, bred for their strength and speed. Blue-skinned Rutanians rode on their backs, dressed in colorful furs and hides. Barking alongside and occasionally leaping up to snap at the heels of a hud were fierce nek battle dogs attached to the huds' saddles with tethers. Despite their fierce, unpredictable natures, many Rutanians bred them and kept them as hunters and pets.

Qui-Gon waited as the group rode up to them. The Rutanian at the head of the party swung off his hud with an angry motion.

Rutanians were known for their height, standing nearly a meter taller than Qui-Gon. This Rutanian was taller than most. He was a hostile presence, dressed in the skin and pelts of various creatures sewn together with thick silver cord in a colorful patchwork. His long, glossy hair was elaborately braided and hung over his shoulders. His thick fingers, overgrown with hair, were covered with jeweled rings.

"You scared away my herd!" he bellowed, stomping toward the Jedi in heeled boots.

"Black holes and blast the galaxy! What kind of fools are you?"

"We are the Jedi you summoned from Coruscant, King Frane," Qui-Gon said calmly.

"You're a couple of gundark brains!" King Frane continued to bellow. "Did you see that herd — we could have captured twenty-five skins at least. I've been tracking them for three days. You'll pay for this!"

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Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon to see how he would respond. He couldn't believe that King Frane had insulted the Jedi in such a rude fashion. Would Qui-Gon turn on his heel and leave?

Qui-Gon was silent for a moment. He stared at King Frane without rudeness, waiting out his anger. The intelligence and calm in the Jedi's gaze soon made King Frane uncomfortable. His unease quickly changed back to anger.

"Don't use any Jedi mind tricks on me!" he fumed. "You destroyed my sport for today. I've a mind to send you back to your Temple and declare war on the Senalis! At least I know I can blast them before they get away."

"Especially if you have seeker droids to track them," Qui-Gon said. "Aren't seeker droids illegal on Rutan? I understood that they were outlawed so all Rutanians would have an equal chance at the game. Even the king," Qui-Gon added pointedly.

King Frane's glassy green eyes glinted in his dark-blue skin. Obi-Wan could not decipher what he saw there. Would the king explode and insult them further? Obi-Wan knew that hunting was a popular pastime on Rutan. Rutanian skins and pelts were renowned throughout the galaxy for those who wore such things. Animals were bred specifically for the smoothness and beauty of their hides. Then they were sent in the wild in order to provide sport for the population.

King Frane prided himself on being the best hunter of all. Lists of kills were posted at the end of every year, and the king was always first. Now Qui-Gon had exposed the fact that he cheated.

Suddenly, King Frane let out a loud, explosive laugh. The royal party behind him broke out into nervous chuckles as well.

"Trumped by a Jedi! I'll be a gundark brain myself!" King Frane chortled. "I can see that I sent for the best minds in the galaxy. That means I am as smart as they are, am I not?"

He threw an amiable arm around Qui-Gon's shoulder. "Come, friend," he said. "I am glad to see you after all. You and

Jude Watson

your young companion are welcome to join us at our feast.
There, we can discuss the foul and treacherous Senali."

Chapter Three

The Jedi were led into a vast stone hall in the center of the royal palace. A huge bonfire was blazing in a pit set in the middle of the hall. The surrounding walls were blackened with smoke. Nek battle dogs lay on the cold stone floor, chained to posts carved with scenes of past battles. Stuffed heads of kudana and other native creatures were mounted on the walls at regularly spaced intervals. One large, fierce kudana was stuffed and stood on its hind legs at the entrance to the hall, sharp teeth bared. Qui-Gon reflected that it was one of the least appetizing dining halls he'd ever been in.

The odor of roasting meat filled their nostrils as they followed King Frane to the main table set up near the pit. Smoke blew in their faces. Obi-Wan coughed, then stared in distaste at the bloody carcass revolving over the flame. Qui-Gon was sure his usually ravenous young Padawan would not have much of an appetite this evening.

"Sit down, sit down," King Frane urged them as he took a seat at the head of the long table. "No, Taroan. Let the Jedi sit next to me."

A tall, light-blue Rutanian with coiled braids arranged in loops around his head stepped back and glowered at the Jedi.

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"My son, Prince Taroon," King Frane said. Qui-Gon turned to greet him, but King Frane waved his hand, and Taroon took a place at the other side of his father. "Let's talk about Leed. That's the reason you're here, eh?"

Qui-Gon sat as a server placed a heaping plate of meat in front of him. He nodded his thanks.

"Prince Leed has decided to stay on Senali —" he began.

"Decided!" King Frane interrupted with a roar. He pounded the table. "So that lying dinko Meenon tells me! My son has been kidnapped!"

"But you yourself saw the holocom," Qui-Gon pointed out. "I have seen it, too. Prince Leed seems sincere."

"He has been coerced, or threatened," King Frane insisted, forking up a huge piece of meat. He shook his fork at Qui-Gon. "Or they gave him one of their potions. They are primitives. They can use herbs and plants to cloud the mind. Leed would never decide to stay. Never!"

Suddenly, even as he stared fiercely at Qui-Gon, Frane's large green eyes filled with tears. He picked up his napkin and began to mop his streaming eyes. "My oldest child. My treasure. Why won't he face me?" He blew his nose in his napkin and brooded. When he next looked at the Jedi, his face wore a mask of anger. "It is the dirty Senalis who made him do this!" he bellowed. "Why will he not come and face me?"

Perhaps because he is afraid of you, Qui-Gon thought. But he could not say it aloud. The king's changes of mood were startling, but they seemed sincere.

"What am I to do, Jedi?" King Frane forked the meat again and chewed vigorously. "Declare war?"

"Naturally we oppose such a step," Qui-Gon said. "That's why we are here. We can meet with Leed and assess the situation."

"Bring him home," King Frane said. "And eat your dinner. It is the best Rutan has to offer." Qui-Gon took polite bites. "Meenon has agreed to our coming."

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"He is a pig! He is a savage!" King Frane cried. "Do not believe a word he says. He stole my son. What does he know of loyalty? My son is a jewel. I kept up with his progress on their filthy planet. They have annual contests of speed and endurance and skill. He has won every year since he was thirteen. He is a jewel, I tell you. A natural leader!" He thumped the table. "Meant to be my heir. He is the only one who can succeed me! Everything I have, everyone around me is worthless if I cannot have my firstborn son follow me."

Qui-Gon glanced at Taroon. The younger son was pretending not to listen, but King Frane's bellow was certainly audible to him. Why did his father treat him as though he were invisible? He was only a year younger than Leed, a thin, awkward young man with long arms and legs. Was he worthless to his father?

"I will read the truth in Leed's eyes," King Frane continued, heaping another helping of meat onto Qui-Gon's still full plate. "Bring him to me, and I will know. If they will not let him go, I will invade their planet and bring them to their knees. You tell Meenon that."

"Jedi will not deliver a threat," Qui-Gon said firmly. "We will try to persuade your son to come back. We will not force him, or force the government of Senali. But if we bring him back, you cannot force him to stay. I must have your word on that."

"Yes, yes, you have my word. But Leed will want to stay, I guarantee you. The boy knows his duty. I will send my younger son Taroon with you to deliver the threat to Meenon. He will also take Leed's place on Senali when my boy returns home."

"I will not allow Taroon to deliver a threat, either," Qui-Gon said. "If that is your objective, Taroon must stay behind. His presence could compromise a diplomatic mission. Meenon could feel pressured by the presence of someone from the royal family. Besides, Jedi always negotiate alone."

King Frane tore off a piece of meat with his sharp yellow teeth. Craftiness gleamed in his eyes. "I have just signed an order to imprison Meenon's daughter, Yaana, here on Rutan. I hear she

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is just as beloved to Meenon as Leed is to me. Let him know the pain of a grieving father! What do you think of that, Jedi?"

"It is a mistake," Qui-Gon said quietly. "Meenon will take it as a provocation. It will bring you close to war. I don't think you want that, no matter what you say. Your people do not want war."

"My people want what I tell them to want!" King Frane bellowed furiously. "Am I not king?"

Qui-Gon didn't blink. "We will allow Taroona to accompany us if you rescind your order to imprison Yaana."

King Frane stopped chewing and gave Qui-Gon a hard stare that lasted several moments. Then he slammed his hand down on the table again. "Done! The Jedi is clever!" He turned to the rest of the table, beaming. "The Jedi will bring Leed home again!"

The rest of the royal party erupted in cheers.

King Frane turned back to Qui-Gon. "In three days," he said. "That is all I give you. If you don't return with Leed, Yaana gets thrown into the foulest prison on Rutan." In another abrupt change of mood, he slapped Qui-Gon on the back. "Now enjoy!"

The rest of the royal party now felt free to relish their food. Conversation rose and buzzed amongst them.

Obi-Wan leaned over and spoke to Qui-Gon. "Taroona does not seem happy to be accompanying us," he said in a low tone.

"I noticed that," Qui-Gon answered. "Yet the negotiation went well. I wanted Taroona with us all along. I suspected that King Frane would imprison Yaana. We have bought her a few more days of freedom."

"But how did you know these things?" Obi-Wan asked, puzzled.

"Find the emotion, predict the deed," Qui-Gon replied. "It was a natural step — it is the only thing King Frane has to threaten Meenon with. King Frane is the type of ruler to lash out in the only way he can. Yet he is afraid of war, so he will allow himself to be persuaded to wait. Now all we have to do is bring

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back Leed. If we believe he is sincere and wants to remain on Senali, we must help him reconcile his father to his decision. If nothing goes wrong and every party acts with honesty and forgiveness, the situation will resolve itself."

Qui-Gon glanced over at Taroon. The young Rutanian had not joined in the feasting or conversation, but had kept his arms folded. His eyes were watchful and sullen.

"So you don't see danger ahead?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon gave a brief smile. "I see tangled loyalties and the potential for misunderstandings. And even the smallest misunderstandings can bring danger when a situation is as volatile as this one. Words do not always echo what is in the heart. And things are rarely as simple as they appear."

Chapter Four

From above, the planet Senali looked like a shining blue jewel. So much of its surface was water that it reflected light and seemed to shimmer. As their transport skimmed over the surface toward Meenon's landing platform, Obi-Wan thought he had never seen such a beautiful world.

The seas seemed to hold a thousand shades of blue and green. Chains of islands dotted the water like necklaces. Lush green foliage and blooming flowers dotted the islands and were planted on the docks of the floating cities. Many of the structures were fashioned out of the branches and fronds of a native tree with bright red bark.

They landed on the royal landing platform and were greeted by several members of the chief's guard. Senali were the same species as Rutanians, but they had a silvery cast to their skin due to the tiny scales that covered their bodies. They were excellent swimmers with unusually strong breath control. Unlike Rutanians, their hair was worn short, and many of them wore headpieces and necklaces fashioned from coral and shells.

The Jedi and Taroan followed the guards into Meenon's dwelling. It was a long, low building that floated on the waters of a deep, green lagoon. The guards led them to an interior

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courtyard that had been transformed into a blooming garden, with drooping fronds that shaded them from the hot sun.

Meenon was tending to the garden, but straightened up and gave a formal bow to the Jedi when they arrived. He was dressed in a linen tunic and was barefoot. A simple headdress of white shells circled his shaved head.

"I am honored to have the Jedi on my beautiful planet," he said.

"We are honored to be here," Qui-Gon responded. He introduced himself, Obi-Wan, and Taroon. "We would like to see Prince Leed as soon as possible."

"Ah." Meenon looked down at the basket of flowers in his hand. He touched one bloom. "We have a small problem."

Beside him, Obi-Wan felt Taroon tense. "Problem?" Qui-Gon asked neutrally.

Meenon looked up. "Leed has gone into hiding."

Qui-Gon did not react, but studied the leader carefully.

Taroon threw his chest out in a challenge. "What a surprise to hear my brother has disappeared! And you should refer to my brother by his title. He is *Prince* Leed. You show him disrespect."

Meenon bristled. "We do not believe in titles on Senali. Titles make divisions. We are all equal on Senali, unlike on your barbaric world."

Taroon's eyes glinted. "Unlike primitives, we value our bloodlines."

Qui-Gon inserted himself smoothly into the conversation before it could flare into open argument. "You say that Leed has disappeared. He left no word of where he was going?"

"No," Meenon said, turning his back to Taroon. "I do not know where he is."

Taroon put himself in front of Meenon again. "And you'll swear to this?" he demanded, eyes flashing.

Meenon gazed at Taroon. "I do not need to swear. I do not lie."

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Qui-Gon spoke a beat more quickly than his usual reserve. Obi-Wan knew that he was trying to restrain Taroona without seeming to. "This is unfortunate."

Meenon shrugged. "He knew of your coming. I assume that is why he is in hiding. He does not want to return to Rutan."

"We are not here to force him," Qui-Gon said. "We only wish to talk to him."

"I assured him that if he met with you I would not allow him to be taken back to Rutan by force," Meenon said. "Apparently he has taken matters into his own hands despite my advice."

"We will search for him, with your permission," Qui-Gon said as Taroona fumed beside him. "Can we question the family who brought him up?"

"Here on Senali we live in clans," Meenon said. "I entrusted him to my sister's clan, the Banoosh-Walores. They live one kilometer to the west, on Clear Lake. You are welcome to question them."

Qui-Gon nodded. "We will be in touch."

"I wish you ease and serenity," Meenon said, bowing.

Obi-Wan could feel Taroona's anger as they walked out of the courtyard to exit Meenon's dwelling.

"He wishes us ease and serenity after such news?" Taroona said, disgusted. "He was mocking us!"

"It is a traditional good-bye of the Senali," Qui-Gon remarked mildly.

"This is intolerable!" Taroona continued. "He plays us for fools!"

"Your father will not take this news well," Qui-Gon said. "He will be angry, as you are."

"I am nothing like my father," Taroona said through his teeth.

"I wonder if Meenon knows more than he is telling," Obi-Wan wondered.

"Of course he does," Taroona spit out. "All Senali are treacherous. This is simply a tactic to delay us."

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"Let's hope we can learn something from his sister's clan," Qui-Gon said. "Until then, let us remain calm."

They walked out into the bright sunlight. Suddenly Taroona wheeled and kicked a tall flowering bush that stood near the entrance to the dwelling. He attacked it in a frenzy, fists flailing and feet flying. Red petals showered from the bush and soon were strewn all over the walkway.

"Well, I see you have inherited your father's temper, at least," Qui-Gon remarked.

Chapter Five

The red-and-blue dwelling of the Banoosh-Walore clan was part of the main city of Senali, which was built on floating docks and platforms. The various islands were connected to each other by graceful silver bridges that arched over the blue water.

The brightly painted structure sprawled over a large area. The main part of the dwelling was merely a frame connected with walls of woven fronds that rolled up to let in sea breezes. One wall was let down to protect those inside from the sun. The rest of the house was open on three sides. There was no need to knock. They could see the members of the clan gathered in the large central room.

A tall female Senali with pink coral studded in her short dark hair beckoned them inside. "Meenon said you were arriving. Welcome, welcome! Let me introduce you. I am Ganeed, Meenon's sister. These are my sons Hinen and Jaret, and this is Jaret's wife Mesan and their daughter Tawn. That is Drenna, my youngest, and Wek, my sister's boy, and Nonce, and my husband, Garth, and my father, Tonai. Oh, and there's my elder mother, Nin, and the baby, we call her Bu."

A small boy tugged on Ganeed's tunic. "And me!"

She put a hand on his head. "Of course, Tinta. I didn't forget you. I saved you for last because you are so important."

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Obi-Wan nodded to the bustling, busy group. He knew he would never be able to keep the names straight. He had recently begun memory training at the Temple. He could redraw a tech blueprint that he had only glimpsed for ten seconds or recite a complicated formula he had just heard once, but he still was not very skilled at remembering the names of a crowd of living beings. He counted on Qui-Gon to do that.

One of Ganeed's sons, either Jaret or Hinen, sat at a long table, peeling fruit with a young Senali female. Was it Wek or Mesan? The elder Senali stood at a stove, stirring something in a pot that smelled delicious. A young man rocked the baby, and a slender young Senali female with silvery hair sat in a corner, mending a fishing net. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, and he could not distinguish any one voice except for Ganeed, who called for everyone to be quiet. Finally she picked up a pot and spoon and banged on the pot bottom. The clan members finally were still.

"There," she said with satisfaction.

Taroon remained a stiff presence by Obi-Wan's side. Obi-Wan felt just as awkward. He admired the way Qui-Gon swung his leg over a stool and began to speak earnestly with Tinta, admiring a toy in the small boy's hand. Obi-Wan did not have the knack of ease with strangers.

"I should say right away that we have no idea where Leed is," Ganeed said, without waiting for Qui-Gon to ask a question. "He left a note which said only that it would be better for his clan if we did not know."

Qui-Gon nodded. "I see."

One of Ganeed's sons spoke up. "That is just like Leed. He does not like to cause trouble." His wife nodded. "He is very kind."

Ganeed's husband, Garth, chimed in. "Even as a boy his kindness endeared him to everyone. It is a pity such trouble has come to him."

Jude Watson

"A pity his father will not listen to reason," Hinen — or was it Jaret? — said.

Obi-Wan saw Taroorn's hands clench into fists, hidden by his tunic. The prince was struggling to contain himself. Qui-Gon had warned him to let the Jedi do all the talking.

The elder Nin looked up from the stove. "He always had his own way of doing things, our Leed. Set the table for the meal, Wek, if you please. Will our guests join us?"

"I'm afraid we cannot, but I thank you," Qui-Gon said politely.

The boy Wek began to set places at the long table. He appeared only a year or two younger than Leed. Were they close companions? Obi-Wan wondered.

The same thought must have crossed Qui-Gon's mind. "Is there any special place Leed is fond of going, Wek?" he asked in a kind tone.

Wek placed a bowl on the table. "Well, he likes to swim," he said.

"When he isn't sailing," Jaret or Hinen said.

"True, Jaret," the other son said. At least Obi-Wan could now keep the two of them straight.

"I love to sail!" Tinta cried. "Leed taught me how, and —"

"But he was always walking in the forest, don't forget," Mesan interrupted, turning to Jaret. "That's where I would look —" She stopped abruptly to pick up the baby, Bu, who had begun to fuss.

"He only goes in spring," Nonce broke in over the wailing of the baby. He walked to the stove and began to help Nin, slicing bread for the meal. "He —"

"He goes in summer, too! Everyone goes in summer!" Wek argued. "You just don't notice because —"

"Who goes in summer? It's too hot," Tawn broke in. "Leed likes the cool water and long swims. And —"

"Food," Hinen said, leaning over to snatch a piece of bread off the counter. "Leed likes his meals. He'll be back before

long—ow!" he cried as Nonce rapped his knuckles with a wooden spoon.

The baby began to cry again, and Jaret took her from Mesan's arms. Tinta began to quarrel with the other young boy.

"I agree with Jaret," Tonai said serenely over the noise of the baby crying and the voices raised in a quarrel. "I would search the forest, not the sea."

"I said the sea, not the forest!" Jaret protested. "You never listen to a word —"

"What do I know anyway?" Tonai broke in, shrugging.

"You know plenty, old man," the elder Nin said. "Except when to go to bed."

"I know when to eat," Tonai said, seating himself at the table with great pleasure. Nin ladled some soup in a bowl.

"I think he went back to Rutan on his own," Garth said. "That would make sense. He did not want to worry us."

A storm of argument broke out over this last suggestion. Jaret and Hinen began to shout. Tinta upset the plate full of bread. Bu began to hiccup, and Jaret handed her to Ganeed.

Ganeed smiled at the Jedi over the baby's shoulder as she patted her back. "You see? We have no idea where Leed could be."

"Even Drenna doesn't know," Tinta said.

Qui-Gon cast his keen gaze on the young boy. "Is Drenna a special friend of Leed's, Tinta?"

"She is closest to him in age," Ganeed said, handing the baby to Mesan.

Obi-Wan shot a searching glance at Drenna for the first time. Her close-cropped hair almost matched the silvery cast to her dark-blue skin. She raised her silver eyes to the Jedi.

"You can see this place is confusing," she said, making a wry face. "Maybe Leed just wanted some peace and quiet to make up his mind. I think he will return soon."

"Drenna, help Wek set the table," Nin called. "Go sit down, boy, you are underfoot."

Jude Watson

"Let's eat," Jaret said. "I'm hungry."

"Well, come to the table, then," Nin scolded. "I can't do everything for you."

Drenna sprang up and began to ladle the food into bowls.

"Yes, perhaps Leed will return soon," Qui-Gon said. "He will miss his clan. As you miss him."

Ganeed's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "As we do," she said softly.

A silence fell over the clan for the first time. Obi-Wan could read sorrow on each face. Leed was truly loved, he saw.

For a moment, all they heard were Bu's tiny hiccups as she nestled her downy head against her mother's shoulder.

"This is a waste of time," Taroona suddenly said. "They won't tell us anything."

"We should leave you to your midday meal," Qui-Gon said graciously, bowing to the clan.

"We wish you ease and serenity," Ganeed said, smiling through tear-filled eyes. "And if you find Leed, please protect him."

"We shall," Qui-Gon promised.

They retreated down the walkway that joined the structure to the main dock, then started back toward Meenon's dwelling.

"They were no help at all," Taroona complained. "I don't know how Leed could stand to live with so many people."

"They seem to enjoy one another's company," Qui-Gon observed.

"They certainly like to talk," Obi-Wan added. He had felt awkward among the clan, but he had also felt their warmth and their obvious affection for one another.

"Yet they did not say a thing," Qui-Gon said. "Did you notice that, Padawan?"

Obi-Wan thought about it. "They all contradicted each other's guesses. It seemed as though they were giving us leads, but they weren't."

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"Exactly. And then when we turned our attention to Drenna, suddenly everyone needed to eat. Come this way." Qui-Gon headed down a smaller floating dock that was perpendicular to the main passageway. A small floating garden was set up for the benefit of the dwellers of the floating city. Qui-Gon paused behind a lush bush studded with orange blooms.

"What are we doing?" Taroona asked irritably. "We have no time to pick flowers."

Qui-Gon didn't answer. Obi-Wan saw that from here they had a perfect view of the front of the clan's dwelling. In another moment, Drenna came outside. She stood on the dock and looked to her right, then her left. She had buckled a supply belt around her tunic, and Obi-Wan could see its pouch was full.

She turned and quickly walked down the dock in the opposite direction.

"Let's go," Qui-Gon said.

"Why should we follow a Senali on her useless errands?" Taroona scowled.

"Because she will bring us to Leed," Qui-Gon answered.

Chapter Six

At first it was easy to follow Drenna. Senalis strolled along the docks on this fine day, pausing to purchase flowers and food at various markets that were set up along the way. The Jedi and Taroon could melt into the crowd and keep her in sight.

The Jedi had already adapted to the idea that the ground was not firm under their feet. The docks swayed and bobbed in the gentle roll of the sea. Taroon had more trouble. Occasionally he would stumble and his skin would flush to a bluish rose.

"What kind of a world builds its cities on water?" he grumbled after he had stumbled again and narrowly escaped tumbling off the dock. "I don't see how my brother can stand this awful place."

Qui-Gon lifted an eyebrow at Obi-Wan in a private gesture. Obi-Wan smiled. He knew what his Master was thinking. Senali had turquoise seas, blooming gardens, and, from the looks of it, a peaceful and content population. Taroon harbored the prejudice of Rutanians, most of whom had not set foot on Senali since the war that had divided them forever. They considered Senalis lazy primitives who had not built a thriving culture or economy and who lived only for pleasure.

The floating city stretched over several kilometers. Drenna led them over bridges and walkways into different sections, some

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with brightly painted multistoried buildings, some with eccentric structures that bobbed cheerfully on the water. They passed rows and rows of docks with different crafts tied to the pilings. The crowd began to thin, and they hung back, keeping Drenna just in sight.

At last Drenna turned toward one of the silver bridges that connected the floating city to the mainland. She hurried over the bridge and disappeared down a road that curved around a dense thicket of trees. They quickly followed.

Trees lined the road that verged the shore. The branches were heavy with green fronds that bent the limbs down to the ground, their feathery leaves lying like lace on the sandy road. Deep green shadows flickered, and every now and then a glimpse of the turquoise sea appeared like a startling vision through the thick curtain of leaves.

Qui-Gon tapped into the Force to help him track Drenna. He had to be alert to the smallest sounds ahead, to the disturbance in the air he could feel as she passed through it.

Senali was a small world, and most of the population traveled by sea or on foot. The Jedi did not see many speeders or other craft that moved through air. Small transports occasionally buzzed by, carrying goods and food.

The road split into two main roads and a narrower trail that wound through the trees. Drenna was no longer in sight. Qui-Gon hesitated only a moment before determining that she had taken the narrow trail.

Obi-Wan kept close on his heels. The path slowly narrowed until they had to go single file. The firmly packed soil of the road had changed to a loose, powdery sand that sucked at their footsteps. Again, Taroon had trouble keeping up.

"There's more sand in my boots than on the ground," he muttered. "Why don't these people build decent roads?"

Qui-Gon held up a hand and they stopped. He closed his eyes, listening intently.

"She is running now," he said, surprised. "We must go faster."

Jude Watson

They quickened their pace. Taroona stopped complaining and concentrated on keeping up with them. The sound of the surf covered the noise of their feet slapping against the sand.

They turned a corner and saw that the trail ran straight into the high wall of a sheer cliff. There was still room to walk around it, along a narrow strip of beach. A wave lapped at their heels as they skirted the cliff wall, avoiding the rocks that were studded with sharp coral that could slice into skin.

They found themselves in a beautiful cove with a beach that curved like a quarter moon. Sheer cliffs surrounded them.

The beach was empty except for a slight figure in the distance. Qui-Gon had been right: Drenna was running now, jogging easily down the beach toward the end of the far curve.

"Does she realize now that she's being followed?" Obi-Wan asked as they picked up their pace. They kept in the shadow of the cliff in case she turned around.

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stopped short. He looked up at the cliff, then back at the churning sea.

"She always knew she was being followed," he said. "We must go back."

Taroona looked behind them. "Look at that. The path is already cut off."

Waves now thundered against the cliff wall. If they tried to return, they would be trapped. The tide was strong enough to batter them against the sharp rocks.

Water suddenly foamed around their ankles.

"The tide is coming in," Obi-Wan said.

"The tides are famous on Senali," Qui-Gon said, his eyes now moving over the cliff face. "The four moons make them swift and extreme."

Drenna had disappeared around the cliff face at the far end of the beach. Obi-Wan calculated the distance, then stepped back as a wave of alarming force hit him at the knees.

They would not make it, he realized.

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Taroon came to the same conclusion as he glanced at the faces of the Jedi.

"She led us into a trap!" he cried.

Chapter Seven

Qui-Gon was already calculating their next move. "We can run to the end of the cove that way. The tide will catch up with us, so we'll have to swim around the cliff. At least there are no rocks on that end. We can make it."

"But I can't swim!" Taroon cried. "No Rutanian can. Swimming is for primitives."

"Right now, swimming is for survival," Qui-Gon said dryly. He scanned the sea. He saw roiling eddies and a tidal pattern that was extremely treacherous. He and Obi-Wan could make it — they were Jedi. But he could not risk Taroon's life. He would not want to endanger Obi-Wan, either.

They quickly backed up as the next wave hit them waist-high. The strength of it was astonishing. Taroon almost fell, and Qui-Gon caught him by the arm and steadied him.

"I hate the sea," Taroon muttered. He wiped his wet hair out of his eyes.

"How do you feel about climbing?" Qui-Gon asked.

Taroon eyed the cliff. "You've got to be kidding!" he exclaimed. "There's no way to climb that cliff."

Qui-Gon did not answer. He knew there was no time to waste. He slipped his electrobinoculars from his utility belt and scanned the cliff, looking for handholds and footholds. There

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weren't many. And the cliff was so high that their liquid cable launchers wouldn't reach the top. There was nothing to hook them around on the cliff face, either.

The water foamed around his knees and tried to suck him backward. Taroon clutched Obi-Wan for support.

"How could you have gotten us into this?" he asked the Jedi. "That female has made fools of us!

Qui-Gon focused the electrobinoculars. He saw a tiny fissure in the rock, just enough for the spike tip of his liquid cable launcher to find purchase. It would have to do.

He replaced the electrobinoculars and withdrew the launcher, motioning for Obi-Wan to do the same.

"Wait until mine hooks, then launch yours," he directed.

Qui-Gon got it in one try, which was fortunate, for the next wave was up to the Jedi's shoulders. Obi-Wan got his launcher anchored on the second try, at the next ebb. They tested the line, and it held.

"Go," Qui-Gon said tersely. He motioned to Taroon to take hold of the cable. He would stay behind the prince in order to protect him from falling.

He only hoped the launchers would raise them high enough to escape the tide. The form of vegetation clinging to the wall told him that most of the cliff went underwater at high tide. Qui-Gon did not look forward to hanging in midair and watching the sea rise ever closer to them.

He watched as his Padawan zoomed ahead, pulled by the cable. He dangled above their heads.

"Hold on," Qui-Gon instructed Taroon. The cable retracted, bringing them high above the beach. They hung suspended near the cliff face.

"Do you think the water will reach us?" Taroon asked, beginning to turn around.

"Don't look down," Qui-Gon said sharply, but it was too late. Taroon had seen how high they were. He flinched, and his knee

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banged against the cliff. He let out a hoarse cry and closed his eyes.

"I am right behind you, Taroona," Qui-Gon told him. "We can get through this if you don't panic. The cable is holding our weight. Don't look down."

Taroona took a deep breath. "I'll be all right," he said. "I was just surprised, that's all."

Qui-Gon admired his composure. He knew Taroona was afraid.

"See if you can find a foothold," Qui-Gon directed. "That will take the weight off your arms. You can't fall. You're fastened to the cable."

Qui-Gon searched the cliff area overhead. He could not see another fissure. They would have to hang here and hope the sea wouldn't rise to drown them. He knew that he and Obi-Wan could hang here for hours if they had to. But he was not sure about Taroona.

"The tide is still rising," Obi-Wan said to him quietly. "The waves could break over our heads. Maybe we should put on our breathers."

Qui-Gon nodded. It was a good suggestion. "In a minute." He did not want to panic Taroona until he had to.

"Can't we go higher?" Taroona asked nervously. "I can feel the spray of the waves." "We are all right for now," Qui-Gon said. But he could see that within moments the crashing waves could hit them.

Suddenly, he saw another cable shoot down from the overhang a hundred meters up. It dangled between Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan.

"Take it!" someone shouted. "It will hold all of you! The sea is rising!"

Qui-Gon reached out and tested it. He exchanged a glance with Obi-Wan.

Should we do it? Obi-Wan asked silently.

We have no choice, Qui-Gon answered him.

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Obi-Wan nodded. He grasped the cable first. Taroon came next. Then Qui-Gon. The three of them now hung on a cable and had to trust whoever was overhead.

The cable retracted slowly, bringing them smoothly up the face of the cliff toward the top. Obi-Wan clambered over, then Taroon. Qui-Gon was last to tumble over the edge. He shot to his feet immediately.

A tall, sturdy local stood before them. A necklace of pink coral was hung around his neck and circled his wrist. He grinned at them.

"Glad you could make it."

Taroon gasped. "Leed!"

Chapter Eight

Leed joyfully rushed toward his brother. They threw their arms around each other.

"My brother!" Leed cried.

"My brother!" Taroon answered.

"How it pleases me to have your company," Leed said. "You've grown almost as tall as I am."

"Taller," Taroon said with a smile.

They stepped back. Leed turned to the Jedi. "And you must be the Jedi, sent to bring me back to Rutan."

"I am Qui-Gon Jinn and this is Obi-Wan Kenobi," Qui-Gon said. "We are here to ensure that you are not being forced to remain or manipulated."

"You can see I am neither," Leed said.

"I have not had time to see much of anything yet," Qui-Gon responded in a friendly way. Leed turned to his brother. "I must apologize for Drenna. She wasn't trying to kill you, just to protect me."

"She may not have meant to, but she almost *did* kill me," Taroon said darkly. "I could have drowned!"

"Yet you did not," Leed said. "Come out, Drenna. You see they will not harm me."

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Leaves rustled, and Drenna emerged from the blue-green shadows of the overgrown trees. She had blended into the shades and shadows perfectly. Taroona was surprised to see her, but Obi-Wan saw from Qui-Gon's expression that he had sensed her presence.

Drenna stood apart from the group. She eyed them warily, clearly not convinced they had not come to abduct Leed.

She turned to the Jedi and Taroona. "Well? You see that Leed is here of his own free will. Now you can return to Rutan."

Qui-Gon turned to Leed. "If you truly wish to remain on Senali, you should face your father with your decision."

Leed shook his head firmly. "Nothing can make me return. He will force me to stay, imprison me."

"If we give you our word that we will not allow your father to force you to stay, will you come?" Qui-Gon asked.

"It is not that I do not respect the great powers of the Jedi," Leed said slowly. "I do not wish to offend you. But my father has wiles and treacheries you have not seen. There are things you can't protect me from."

"That is not true!" Taroona protested.

"If you feel as you do, we have a problem," Qui-Gon said to Leed, his tone pleasant but firm. "You will not return to Rutan. And we will find it hard to leave Senali without you."

Leed met Qui-Gon's gaze stonily. Neither of them moved. Obi-Wan's eyes went from one to the other. In both of them, he saw conviction that would not be swayed. Qui-Gon was such a strong presence that it was hard to imagine going up against his will.

Yet he had done the same once.

On Melida/Daan, he had met Qui-Gon's resolute will with his own. They had clashed and been torn apart as a result. Obi-Wan had believed then with all his heart that he was right. He had come to see that he had been blinded by loyalty to a cause not his own.

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But what about Leed? He had lived on Senali for most of his childhood. He had come to manhood here. Obi-Wan could not help feeling sympathetic to Leed's wishes. It was obvious that he loved his brother. But it was clear that his bond with his adopted sister, Drenna, was just as strong.

In an abrupt change of mood that reminded Obi-Wan of Leed's father, Leed broke the tension with a shrug and a warm smile. "Well, then. If you are to be my guests, I shall have to bring you to my home. Come."

Leed led them through a maze of overgrown paths and then struck out through a marsh, moving easily from only slightly submerged rocks to firm ground undetectable to most eyes. The air here was thick and close. Brightly colored flying creatures buzzed and sang overhead.

At last they emerged high above the shoreline on a cliff similar to the one they had left. But here the sea was gentle as the land curved, making a natural harbor. A chain of islands were in the distance.

They hiked down to the beach where Leed and Drenna tossed aside huge fronds to uncover a boat.

They glided over the calm, aquamarine sea, hugging the shore until they came to a lagoon surrounded by a cluster of small islands. A hut fashioned of tree trunks and woven grasses sat on a floating dock offshore. Leed tied the craft to the side and they disembarked.

"The Nali-Erun clan lives on the far island," Leed said, pointing to a lush green island a few kilometers away. "They watch out for me."

"All Senali watch out for one another," Drenna said.

"Why are you hiding in such a remote area, Leed?" Qui-Gon asked. "Are you afraid your father's reach could extend this far?"

Leed nodded as he crouched to untangle some fishing line. "I spoke to my father so many times. We were in regular communication, the way I was with Taroon. But after I told him

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of my decision, he cut me off. He refused to hear me. He said Meenon had influenced me. If it pains him to hear the deepest wish of my heart, why should I go on trying to speak with him?"

Qui-Gon sat down on the dock next to Leed so that they could be at eye level. He began to help untangle the line. "Because he is your father," he said. "And he is afraid he has lost his son."

Leed's hands went still. "I am still his son," he said firmly. "And if he would not be so stubborn, we could be in constant contact. I could come to Rutan for visits, and he could come here. But ever since the war, there is no travel between the two worlds. I would like to change that."

Qui-Gon nodded. "That would be a good change. That is one of the things you could do as ruler of Rutan. You would have it in your power to change many things. Why don't you want to help your world, your people?"

Leed gazed out over the lagoon. "Because Rutan does not feel like my world. Its people don't feel like my people. It is hard to explain. But I found myself here. Underneath this sun I feel at home. And if Rutan is no longer my home I do not have the right to rule it. Senali is in my blood and bones. It is something I cannot help. Even as a small boy, I did not feel part of Rutan. I was afraid to leave my family and come here. But as soon as I stepped off the transport, I felt at home." He glanced at Drenna. "I have found myself here," he said.

Obi-Wan saw hurt on Taroona's face as Leed spoke. As his brother shared a private smile with Drenna, Taroona's face tightened with anger.

Jedi were supposed to remain impartial. But Obi-Wan felt Leed's words strike his heart. Now instead of connecting them to what he'd felt on Melida/Daan, he connected them to the Temple. It was not where he was born. The Jedi Masters were not his parents. Yet it was home. He knew that in his heart and bones. He believed that Leed felt the same.

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"I understand all that you say," Qui-Gon said. "And I ask you this: Is your decision to act according to your heart worth plunging two worlds into war? Are your individual desires so important?"

Leed angrily tossed aside the line. "I do not start a war. My father does."

"He does it for you," Qui-Gon told him.

"He does it for himself!" Leed protested.

Taroon had been restraining himself, but now he stepped forward. "I don't understand you, brother," he said. "What is it that is worth so much to you? A world of strangers? How can you risk the peace of your home planet just for your own desires?"

"You don't understand," Leed said, shaking his head.

"No, I do not!" Taroon shouted angrily. "I do not understand this deep wish of your heart. Is it more important for you to live with primitives than to take up your birthright?"

"Primitives?" Drenna exclaimed. "How dare you call us that!"

Taroon turned on her. "Where are your great cities?" he demanded. "A cluster of shacks bobbing on the sea. Where is your culture, your art, your trade, your wealth? On Rutan, we have centers of learning. We develop new medicines and technologies. We explore the galaxy —"

"Our wealth is in our land and our seas and our people," Drenna said, facing him down. "Our culture and our art is part of our daily lives. You have been on Senali for half a day. How dare you judge us?"

"I know your world," Taroon said. "Any culture you have the Rutanians brought to you."

"I know you brought your taste for blood sports and your arrogance," Drenna shot back. "We got rid of all that when we got rid of you. If we kill a creature, we kill it for food. We do not kill it for sport, or to sell its skin. And you call us primitives!"

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"I do not think it helpful to debate the differences between Rutan and Senali when —" Qui-Gon began, but Drenna interrupted him furiously.

"Only a fool debates with ignorance," she said fiercely. "I do not debate! I speak truth."

"You speak with your own arrogance," Taroon exclaimed. "You don't know Rutan any better than I know Senali! All you know is prejudice and disdain."

"You came here to look down on us," Drenna said with contempt. "I saw that at once. Why do you think your brother should listen to your opinion when it is full of your own bias?"

"Because I am his family!" Taroon roared.

"As am I!" Drenna countered.

"You are not his family," Taroon shouted. "You were just his caretakers. We are his blood!"

"No, Taroon." Leed stepped between them. "Drenna is my sister as you are my brother. And she is right. This is what I leave behind on Rutan," he continued, his voice rising to match Drenna's and Taroon's. "This attitude that you are superior to the Senalis. You do not know Senali, nor do you wish to. Do you really want to live the life of our father, living only to chase animals and feast until you cannot move? Do you want your life goal to be the gathering of more and more wealth, just for the purpose of possessing it?"

"Is that what you think of us?" Taroon demanded. "Now I *know* you've been brainwashed! There is more to Rutan than that, and more to our father as well."

"I spoke hastily," Leed said, gathering control of his voice. "I apologize. Yes, there are good things on Rutan. But they are not things that interest me."

Taroon grasped his brother's arms. "Leed, how could you want to live like this?"

Leed shook him off with an angry gesture. Drenna turned to Leed. "You see? I told you of the contempt the Rutanians hold

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us in. Even your brother. You did not believe me. Now you must see that you can't go back."

"No," Leed said. "I can't go back."

"You cannot face our father because you know you are wrong," Taroon said. "You are afraid of him."

"I am not afraid of him," Leed countered angrily. "I do not trust him. There is a difference. I don't want to be under his influence. I am *glad* I was brought up by others, without being exposed to all his faults. You know after our mother died that there was no one to check him. He is not a bad man, Taroon. Just a bad father."

Taroon's face was tight. "And I was brought up by his side, inheriting all his bad traits, while you have all the good. Is that right?"

Leed took a breath. "That is not what I'm saying." He rubbed his hands over his hair in frustration. "I am not going back, Taroon."

"That is fine," Taroon said, his icy rage now burning hot. "I realize now that I was wrong to try to persuade you. Because even if you were to change your mind, I would not stay here in your place."

Qui-Gon exchanged a helpless glance with Obi-Wan. They had come to Senali hoping that gentle persuasion would help the situation. Qui-Gon had thought that brother to brother, the obvious affection between Leed and Taroon would bring them to common ground.

Instead, the two brothers were farther apart than ever. And the two worlds were now closer to war.

Chapter Nine

Night fell swiftly on Senali. The four moons rose and stars appeared. Leed silently rolled out bedding for them. He placed a simple meal before them. No one spoke. Qui-Gon thought it better to let the tensions cool. He had found through long experience that one thing was the same for all cultures on different worlds: Even the most extreme crises looked better in the morning.

He lay on his sleep mat next to Obi-Wan. "What do you think, Padawan?" he asked softly. "Is Leed right or wrong?"

"That is not for me to say," Obi-Wan responded after a short silence. "I am to remain neutral."

"But I am asking you what you think," Qui-Gon said. "You can have a feeling. It does not have to affect your behavior."

Obi-Wan hesitated again. "I think that personal happiness is less important than duty."

Qui-Gon frowned. His Padawan had evaded the question. He had not lied, but he had not told the truth, either. Yet Qui-Gon would not chide him. The evasion came from a place of goodness. Somehow Obi-Wan must feel that to tell Qui-Gon the truth would be wrong. Qui-Gon would let the question rest there. He would not push. He was learning how to be a Master as surely as Obi-Wan was learning how to be a Padawan.

Jude Watson

Learn not to teach, you must, Yoda had told him. As surely as you must guide, you must also be led.

They fell asleep to the gentle slap of the waves against the dock. The sun rose, and they awoke to the sound of birds and the splash of fish in the sea.

"I'm afraid I have no more food," Leed said to them. His manner was friendlier than last night. Qui-Gon thought that was a good sign. It reinforced his decision not to push today. He would stand back and wait to see if Leed and Taroon could find each other.

Drenna had been awake for some time and had untangled fishing line and lined up short spears for each of them.

"On Senali, we are taught from an early age to be responsible for our own nourishment," she said to them. "If you wish to eat, you must fish."

"I am not hungry," Taroon said haughtily.

Drenna met his gaze steadily. "That is not true," she said. "You are hungry. And you are afraid."

Taroon bristled, and Qui-Gon gathered himself for another argument. He would not allow this one to go so far, he decided. A day of harmony would do them all good.

But before Taroon could speak, Drenna added in a gentler tone, "It is natural to fear water when you cannot swim. But I can teach you. Senali and Rutanians are the same species. If we can be expert swimmers, you can be, too."

Taroon hesitated.

"Of course," Drenna said, shrugging, "you might have a problem. You can't send seeker droids after fish. And if you hit them with a blaster, there goes your breakfast."

She smirked at Taroon. Drenna had thrown out a challenge, Qui-Gon saw.

"I can learn by myself," Taroon said.

"No, you can't. Do not worry," Drenna said in a soft tone. "I won't make fun of you. I had to learn myself, once."

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Taroon rose stiffly and picked up some fishing line and a spear. "All right, then. Let's go."

With a whoop, Leed dove off the dock. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan dove into the warm, clear water after him. Drenna took Taroon on the boat closer to shore to give him his first swimming lesson.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan donned their breathers as Leed treaded water.

"The principal source of food for many Senalis is the rocshore fish," he explained. "It has a spiny body with three large claws. If you take only one claw, the animal lives and grows another. You spear the fish through the tail, where it has no feeling. Then you grab the claw and twist it hard. Be careful or you can lose your fingers. You can watch me take a claw first, if you like."

"That sounds like a good idea," Qui-Gon said.

They dove deep into the lagoon, down where the water was cool and clear. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan followed Leed as he easily speared one rocshore fish, then another, grasping a claw and twisting to sever it, then dropping it into the pouch he wore at his waist. Soon Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had speared their own rocshores and their pouches were full of the meaty claws.

They were almost ready to return when they saw Taroon and Drenna swimming nearby. Taroon was gliding through the water. Drenna had been a good teacher. Taroon's long legs and arms coordinated with smooth strokes and powerful kicks. He did not seem awkward as he had on land. He speared one rocshore, then another. Drenna swam beside him, pointing out fish and spearing her own with deft, perfectly aimed shots.

When they surfaced, Taroon grinned, holding up his full pouch. Qui-Gon realized that he had never seen Taroon smile.

"Pretty good, for your first try," Drenna said. "You are a fast learner."

"You helped," he conceded.

"It took me weeks to learn how to swim that well," Leed told his brother admiringly.

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Taroon turned his head to scan the shoreline. Qui-Gon saw that he was trying to conceal his pleasure at Leed's compliment. "Well, it's better than drowning," he said gruffly.

They swam toward the shore of the lagoon, where Leed and Drenna built a fire. They roasted the claws and cracked them open, squirting juice on the claw meat from tart fruit that Leed and Drenna had gathered.

It was a delicious meal. They ate their fill, then discovered that they still had more than half left over.

"We can take these to the Nali-Erun clan," he said.

They paddled over to the nearby island. The clan had built their homes in the center of the island, underneath the cool shade of the trees. The structures were different from the ones in the main city. Here, they were built with leaves and reeds. They looked flimsy, and some looked ready to tumble down. When Leed held up his present of fish, children ran toward him hungrily.

"Why are they hungry?" Obi-Wan asked.

"They cannot fish in the lagoon," Leed explained in a low tone. "The Homd-Resa clan controls the surrounding seas. The two clans have recently been at odds. The Homd-Resa conducted a raid and destroyed much of their dwellings. The Nali-Erun had to rebuild quickly. They still have not recovered. And for months now they've had to live on fruit and what grains and fish they are able to trade for."

Taroon raised his thick eyebrows at Drenna. "All Senali watch out for each other?"

Drenna looked uncomfortable. "Naturally some clans have conflicts. I did not say Senali was a perfect world."

"Why doesn't Meenon step in?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Because the clans are self-governing," Drenna explained. "Meenon is more of a symbol to us than an actual leader."

The Nali-Erun clan happily distributed the fish and offered the group some. Leed refused but took a bag of pashie, the sweet fruit that grew abundantly on the Nali-Eruns' trees.

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Drenna also handed the head of the clan a pouch full of shells she had collected from the sea floor. The clan members held up each shell and admired it. One of the members began to string a few of the loveliest shells on a cord to fashion a necklace.

He held the finished necklace out to Drenna. She took it with a smile, then hesitated.

Her smile turned impish, and she turned to Taroon and placed it around his neck. "Now you are a real Senali," she said, tilting back her head and smiling up at him.

Taroon was startled. He touched the shells. His eyes met Leed's. "I am still Rutanian," he said. "But I am learning."

They caught small silver fish for the evening meal and Leed made a delicious stew. Taroon ladled it into bowls. Qui-Gon watched as the two brothers passed the bowls between them. There was an ease in their relationship now. The four moons rose, high and full, sending four silver paths down the dark water.

They sat underneath the wide dark sky. Qui-Gon stayed silent. He sensed something growing in Taroon, a new feeling the young man was struggling to voice. He hoped Taroon would find the courage to speak. Tomorrow was the third day. He would have to contact King Frane.

"I suppose we should be getting to sleep now," Leed said at last. "Thank you, Qui-Gon, for allowing us this day without trying to convince me to leave."

"It was a fine day," Taroon said hesitantly. "And I have come to a decision. I will not oppose your wish to stay here, brother. I see what draws you here. I spoke hastily this morning." He turned to the Jedi. "It is a fault I have. I'm sorry for my rudeness to you as well." He gave a wry grin. "You are right, Qui-Gon. I inherit my temper from my father."

"Thank you, brother," Leed said quietly. "You opened your mind and heart. I will do the same. I will return to Rutan and face our father."

Jude Watson

"And I will take your place here until you return," Taroona said.

"Obi-Wan and I will ensure your safety," Qui-Gon promised Leed. "You will be free to return if you still wish to."

The brothers grasped each other's forearms in a show of affection.

"We will not let this divide us," Taroona said.

This was precisely what Qui-Gon had hoped for. Yet sadness hung in the air. Leed had taken the step to remove himself from his family.

Taroona had accepted his right to do this. It was clear that both brothers were heartbroken.

They all said good night. Obi-Wan rolled out his sleep mat next to Qui-Gon's. "Did you know that would happen?" he whispered. "Is that why you didn't challenge Leed today?"

"I hoped the day would bring reconciliation," Qui-Gon answered. "When Drenna offered to teach Taroona how to swim this morning, it was a good sign. I'm sure that Leed spoke to her about being kind to Taroona."

"But Leed was so angry last night," Obi-Wan said. "So was Drenna. Why would they turn around and be nice to Taroona?"

"Because he is Leed's brother," Qui-Gon answered. "Underneath everything, there is a bond between them. Drenna's loyalty is to Leed, so naturally she would help him if he asked."

"I don't understand," Obi-Wan said. "Everyone was so angry, and now everything is resolved. Can it really be so easy?"

"We are not back on Rutan yet. We shall see." Qui-Gon stretched out on the dock and gazed up at the sky. The mission was not over, he knew. He should not feel it was resolved yet. But he was pleased at how the brothers had handled their volatile feelings.

Unless it was too easy, as Obi-Wan had said.

Overhead, the sky curved above him, bright with silver moons and clusters of stars. Here on Senali the atmosphere turned the

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night sky a unique color, somewhere between navy and purple. It was at such times of hushed beauty that Qui-Gon felt the Force vibrate clearly, from the burning energy of the stars to the soft splash of a leaping fish.

"It is seldom that matters resolve themselves so easily," he said softly to Obi-Wan. "Let us hope it is so. Being a Jedi means we honor connections."

Obi-Wan nodded, yawning. It had been a long day. Slowly, his eyes closed. The gentle rocking of the structure soon lulled him to sleep. Qui-Gon felt himself beginning to slide into sleep as easily as he had slid into the warm lagoon.

He awoke with a start. He was instantly awake, alert for the next sound. He only heard silence, but he stood, his hand on his lightsaber.

Obi-Wan's eyes flew open. He jumped soundlessly to his feet. Something was wrong.

The tiniest sounds alerted him, the softest ripple of water. Qui-Gon dashed to the other side of the floating shelter.

A group of Senalis paddled a boat quickly away, their skin smeared with white clay. A bound-and-gagged Leed sat slumped in the stern of the boat.

Qui-Gon searched for Leed's craft, which should have been tied to the dock. It did not surprise him to see it gone. They had most likely sunk it in the lagoon.

It was too far to swim and catch them.

Leed had been kidnapped right under their noses, just as Qui-Gon was no doubt dreaming of a benevolent galaxy of stars.

Chapter Ten

"You are behind this!" Taroona shouted at Drenna. "You did this! I'm supposed to think he's kidnapped, and you're hiding him."

"Your father did this, you fool!" Drenna shouted back. "You only pretended to go along with Leed's decision!"

"That makes no sense at all," Taroona said scornfully. "Leed was headed back to Rutan. Why would my father kidnap him?"

"Because it was too late to change the plan. I don't know! All I know is that Leed is gone." Drenna suddenly slumped on the deck. She did not weep, but she rubbed her hands up and down her arms compulsively. "My brother is gone."

Was Drenna's emotion genuine? Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon for a clue. He found himself adrift on this mission in more ways than one. He was not sure what anyone was feeling. He was not sure if anyone was telling the truth. But he was sorry to see that the truce between Drenna and Taroona had ended. Now they hated each other more than ever.

Qui-Gon crouched by Drenna's side. "He was kidnapped by Senalis, Drenna," he said gently. "He won't be harmed."

"How can you know this for sure?" she whispered. "What if Rutanians took him back to their planet? What if he gets thrown in jail?"

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"I don't know anything for sure," Qui-Gon admitted. "But I do feel that Leed is safe, for the moment. The question is, why would Senalis kidnap him?"

"I don't know," Drenna said, shaking her head. "Leed's decision has split many Senalis. Most believe he should remain, if he wishes. But there are some who do not want a Rutanian to live permanently on the planet."

"We must contact my father at once," Taroon insisted. "He must know that Leed has been taken."

"Yes, he must know," Qui-Gon agreed. "But it would be better if we waited. If we investigate, we might turn up some clues. When we give him the news, we can give him hope as well."

Taroon was already shaking his head. "He must be told now."

"But he could declare war!" Drenna cried.

"That was the risk the Senalis took when they abducted him," Taroon countered. "I was a fool to trust any of you!" He threw a bitter glance at Drenna.

"And I was a fool to think you could have a heart," she replied, just as bitterly.

Taroon stalked off. Qui-Gon turned to Obi-Wan with a sigh.

"We have no choice," he said in a low tone. "We must contact King Frane immediately. If we don't, Taroon will, and our trust with the king will be violated."

He activated his holocom and was put through to the king at once. The king shimmered in the dark night, a ghostly blue presence. Briefly, Qui-Gon told him the news.

"Who took him?" King Frane roared.

"We do not know yet," Qui-Gon answered. "But we will. I can give you my assurance that we will not sleep until we find your son."

"I think you've got enough sleep!" King Frane thundered. "While you fools were dreaming, they stole him from right under your noses! How could you let this happen? You are Jedi!"

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan admired again how Qui-Gon could meet insults with composure.

"Jedi are not infallible, King Frane," his Master said evenly. "We are living beings, not machines. I will find your son."

"You'd better," King Frane responded. "Where is Taroona?"
Taroona reappeared out of the darkness. "Here, Father."

"Start for Rutan at once," King Frane ordered. "I do not want you taken as a prisoner of war." "War?" Qui-Gon asked.

King Frane was grim. "If you don't find my son within the next twelve hours, my army will invade Senali, and we will find him ourselves!"

Chapter Eleven

Taroon gathered his pack hastily, grabbing his items and stuffing them inside.

"You'll need a guide," Qui-Gon said. "Perhaps Drenna will lead you back."

"I do not need a guide," Taroon said angrily. "She will lead me astray and leave me to die, no doubt."

Drenna fixed him with her cool silver gaze. "Don't be a fool. If you go alone, you'll get lost. If you wait until daybreak, the Nali-Erun will lead you to the road."

"That is more time than I want to spend on this vile planet," Taroon said. "Every minute I am here is torture."

Drenna shrugged. "Then swim to shore and find your way through the swamp. Drown or get lost. I don't care."

He glared at her, but she ignored him. Finally Taroon stomped off. He sat down on the dock at a distance from them, facing the horizon where the sun would soon appear.

Qui-Gon motioned to Obi-Wan. "We must contact Meenon and tell him that King Frane is threatening to invade."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I hope he does not insult you the way King Frane did."

Qui-Gon's blue gaze was clear. "King Frane wraps his fear in insults. But what he said was true, Padawan. I should have been

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more alert. I had not thought it necessary to stay awake, or to trade shifts with you. I had not felt even a trickle of apprehension or danger."

"I did not, either," Obi-Wan admitted. "We were both wrong."

"Then we must accept the consequences," Qui-Gon said. "Now, let us face Meenon."

Qui-Gon activated the holocom. He imagined that Meenon would have to be awakened, but the Senali leader appeared immediately.

"You do not need to tell me your news," he said heavily. "King Frane has threatened invasion. You should be aware that if this occurs, he will bring catastrophe to the entire planet of Rutan. Senalis will no longer allow themselves to be ground under the boot of Rutanian forces. All Senalis will fight, just as we did in the great war. And we will triumph once again."

Meenon's harsh words were choked with anger. The wavering image was faint but conveyed every nuance of his expression.

"Many lives were lost in that war," Qui-Gon said. "It left a devastated planet behind. It took generations before Senali recovered."

"Yet we would fight again!" Meenon cried. "We will not stand for invasion!"

"I think calm is called for, as hard as it is to find it," Qui-Gon said. "Neither Senali nor Rutan wants a war —"

Meenon held up a hand. "Stop. You don't understand. King Frane has imprisoned my daughter, Yaana. The beloved daughter I entrusted to his care. He has thrown her in a filthy prison with criminals. He shall pay."

This was bad news indeed. Qui-Gon had feared it. Each step King Frane took was leading his planet into war. He did not seem to care.

"I do not want a war, it's true," Meenon continued. "But only a foolish ruler would not be prepared to fight. My troops are

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being mobilized. We will meet their boot with our own force. We will not wait to be invaded. We will invade *them*!"

"I respect your anger and grief," Qui-Gon said carefully. "But if there was a way to free your daughter and avert a war, would you take it? And, if you invade, how do you know that King Frane will not give the order to execute your daughter?"

Meenon hesitated. "I am not a bloodthirsty savage like King Frane," he said at last. "Of course I would try to avert a war. I do not want to see the daughters and sons of Senali killed."

"Then let us find Leed and free Yaana," Qui-Gon urged. "Give us twelve hours. And help us. Tell us if there is some faction, some clan on Senali who could have done this. We saw them in the moonlight. Their skin was smeared with clay, and they wore headpieces of white coral —"

"The Ghost Ones," Meenon interrupted. "I can't say for sure, but it could be. They call themselves a clan but they have no ties of blood. We are not sure who they are. They have appeared only recently. They make trouble between clans. They are against the trade of royal children, of any contact whatsoever with Rutan. I do not know what they want to gain, but it could be the Ghost Ones who took Leed."

"Do you know where they are?" Qui-Gon asked.

He shook his head. "They are nomadic. They have no single camp. You need a good tracker, one who can track over water."

"You must find us one immediately and send the tracker here," Qui-Gon urged.

"But you are with the best right now," Meenon said. "Drenna."

Meenon cut the transmission. Qui-Gon turned to search for Drenna. Taroon sat as far away as he could get from them.

The rest of the deck was empty. Drenna was gone.

"Where did she go?" Obi-Wan breathed. He had not heard her make a sound.

Taroon saw the Jedi searching the deck. He stood and rushed over to them.

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"Now do you believe me?" he demanded. "She slipped away when you were busy and my back was turned. She is behind the taking of Leed. She's gone to meet him!"

Qui-Gon scanned the dark lagoon. The dark purple sky was graying. On the horizon a faint line of light told him the sun was rising. He could smell the morning.

Far across the lagoon he saw a tiny ripple of movement. It could have been a fish, but he knew it wasn't. Drenna was swimming. She was almost out of the lagoon, into the open sea.

Taroon followed his gaze. "After her!"

Drenna's firm stroke slowed. She dove underneath the surface. When she reappeared, she changed direction slightly.

"She has gone after them, it's true," Qui-Gon said. "But not because she's one of them. She's gone to track them." He turned to Obi-Wan. "Put on your breather. We must catch her." "I am coming with you," Taroon said.

"No. You could not keep up with us, Taroon. And your father wants you back on Rutan." Qui-Gon put his hand on Taroon's shoulder. "I know you want to find your brother. But you must trust us. Go back to Rutan. Do not aggravate your father. The worlds are too close to war. We will bring Leed safely to you."

Reluctantly, Taroon nodded. He watched as Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan donned their breathing devices and dove into the lagoon.

The water was chilly, but as they swam their muscles warmed. Every so often Qui-Gon would surface in order to scan for Drenna ahead of them. She was moving at an erratic pace, swimming quickly, diving, and sometimes changing direction. Every few meters she would dive again.

They caught up to her at last. She was underwater, swimming slowly along the lagoon bottom. When she saw them, she pointed overhead and began to shoot toward the surface.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan followed. The sun was now visible on the horizon and painted the lagoon with a faint blush of pink light.

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"How are you tracking them?" Qui-Gon asked. "Can we help?"

"The rocshore fish," she said. "When a boat passes overhead it blocks out light. The rocshores are very shy and bury themselves in the sand for some time afterward. That's why you can't hunt rocshores on boats. We are lucky the night was so bright. I'm following the mounds. They're hard to see if you don't know where to look. Just follow me."

They dove under the surface again. Drenna swam along the bottom, her head swiveling to take in the sandy surface. Every so often she would come up for air and point in a slightly different direction. Obi-Wan had no idea what had triggered her movement. He found it difficult to see the mounds at all. Was Drenna leading them astray deliberately while the kidnappers got away?

There were so many times on missions that he did not know whom to trust. Qui-Gon seemed to have the gift to see beyond the surface into feelings and motivations that Obi-Wan missed. Qui-Gon never seemed to make a mistake. Only with his former apprentice, Xanatos, had he extended trust too far and met disaster. Xanatos was dead now. Obi-Wan imagined that one such miscalculation was enough for one lifetime. If he watched and learned from Qui-Gon, maybe he could avoid mistakes such as that in the future. Already his past experiences had made him more cautious than he'd been as a student. He was certain he had become a better Padawan as a result.

Drenna wound through the cluster of islands. Sometimes she had to backtrack, but Obi-Wan could see they were making steady progress. He was tiring, but he knew he had reserves of strength he had not yet tapped.

At last she signaled to them to come to the surface with her. A small island was a short distance away, and she jerked her chin toward it.

"I think they are on that island," she whispered. "They dragged the boat up on that beach. They tried to cover the

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marks, but I can tell by the surface of the sand that it's been swept with fronds. I say we circle around and go ashore."

Qui-Gon scanned the island. "They are most likely in the center of the island, hidden by the trees."

Drenna nodded. "If we're lucky, they haven't posted lookouts. They probably think they are safe. This island cluster is uninhabited. There aren't any clans for many kilometers."

"We'll have to risk going ashore," Qui-Gon agreed. "Don't surface until we're near land. We will follow you."

Taking a deep breath, Drenna disappeared silently under the surface.

Obi-Wan followed Drenna with a new burst of energy. They were close now. If they could rescue Leed and return him to Rutan, war could be averted.

They surfaced silently and waded ashore, quickly dashing across the exposed beach to gain shelter under the branches of the sand-sweeping trees.

"It's a small island," Qui-Gon said quietly. "We won't have to search long before we find them."

Jedi learned early at the Temple how to move without sound, but Senalis were just as practiced at the art. The three of them moved through space without disturbing a leaf. They melted through the shade of the trees, their eyes searching for a telltale clue.

Suddenly Qui-Gon stopped. He held up a hand.

Obi-Wan saw and heard nothing. A stand of trees was ahead, the branches so thick the sun only penetrated in thin, watery fingers of light.

Qui-Gon pointed above, a finger to his lips.

It took Obi-Wan a few seconds to realize that the Senalis were sleeping over their heads, nestled into the thick branches of the trees. Preparing for the dawn raid must have kept them awake throughout the night. Their boat and supplies were suspended in a net high above the ground.

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Leed was tied to a tree branch, his back against the trunk. His eyes were closed. His hands and feet were bound with cable wire. A leather gag was tied over his mouth. A deep reddish bruise was forming on his cheekbone. Dried blood caked his tunic.

Drenna didn't flinch. Her jaw tightened, and she silently withdrew the crossbow that was strapped to her back. Qui-Gon withdrew his lightsaber. Obi-Wan followed suit.

Qui-Gon indicated with a gesture that they should try to free Leed without awakening his captors. Obi-Wan and Drenna nodded.

They made no sound as they moved forward, but one of the kidnappers awoke. They froze, but he casually looked down as he stretched. He stopped in the middle of a yawn, his eyes wide.

"Invasion! To your weapons!" he shouted.

Chapter Twelve

The Senalis were armed with the common weapon of their world, dart shooters. Qui-Gon guessed that the darts contained a paralyzing agent. Leed might have some paralysis once they managed to free him.

The darts rained down on them from above. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan kept their backs to each other in order to cover a complete circle. Their lightsabers whirled above their heads in a blur of blue and green as they deflected dart after dart, even as they made their steady way toward Leed.

The branches of the trees were thickly clustered. The tree where Leed was held would not be difficult to climb. But could they climb, deflect darts, and get Leed down the tree, all at the same time? It would be a challenge, Obi-Wan thought grimly.

"We need to get them down here," Qui-Gon said to him tersely. "If we can fight them on the ground, Drenna can rescue Leed."

"I'll get them down," Drenna said. She hoisted her crossbow to her shoulder and began to fire a rapid volley of laser arrows into the trees. She was a blur of motion, firing off five arrows at a time and barely pausing to reload before firing again. The kidnappers began to drop from the trees to escape the arrows falling on their heads.

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"Cover me," she called to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, and started for Leed.

The enemy was now all around them, and Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan kept up a constant dance of movement, deflecting the poison darts and keeping the Senalis away from Drenna as she swiftly made her way up the tree. She removed a small fusioncutter from her utility belt and carefully cut away the carbon wire binding Leed's wrists and ankles. He slumped against her, but when she helped him to his feet he was able make his way down the branch toward the trunk. His legs seemed stiff, but he could walk.

Qui-Gon drifted closer to Obi-Wan. "Gather them underneath that tree," he said, indicating one close to them.

Working together, they whirled and attacked, driving the Senalis together as they evaded the darts. They managed to get them in a rough circle where Qui-Gon had indicated.

Qui-Gon leaped into the air and grabbed a high branch. As he swung, he aimed his light-saber at the net holding the boat aloft. With a series of rapid cuts he sliced through the thick netting. The boat, along with supplies, began to tip. With a final thrust he cut the last cords, and the boat crashed to the ground below.

The kidnappers saw it coming and dropped flat to the ground. The boat reversed in the air and fell over them, forming a solid cage. Supplies rained down on the boat — food, breathing tubes, utility packs, and medpacs.

"Stay under there or we'll blast you," Drenna warned in a loud voice. She raised an eyebrow at Qui-Gon.

He jerked his head toward the beach, and they took off. Most likely the kidnappers would be afraid to follow — at least for a while.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan supported Leed as they ran to the shoreline. They dove into the warm sea. Leed gained strength as he swam, with Drenna helping him along.

Drenna pointed to land in the distance. "There," she said. "That's the mainland. We can get to a main road from there."

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They struck out toward land. Leed flagged as they got nearer, and Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had to tow him ashore. He collapsed on the sand and took deep breaths.

"Thank you," he said when he could speak. "I could not have escaped on my own." He gave them a weak smile. "As I'm sure you can see."

"Do you know who the kidnappers were?" Qui-Gon asked.

He shook his head. "They did not speak. They would not answer my questions. I don't know why they took me, or what they were planning to do. "

"I am glad you're safe," Drenna told him, gazing at him anxiously. "But you're so weak."

"It's the paralyzing dart," he said. "I'll be better soon."

"We must get to a main road and find a way back to the main city and our transport," Qui-Gon said. He turned to Leed. "Your father is threatening to invade Senali. He means it this time, I fear."

"Taroan is furious," Drenna put in, her eyes flashing. "He thinks you and I arranged the kidnapping. No doubt he will tell his father this."

Leed's eyes were clear. "I must return," he said.

"We are close to a road that often runs supplies to the city," Drenna told the Jedi. "We can hitch a ride from a passing transport."

"Then let's go," Qui-Gon said.

Luck was with them. They flagged down a transport, and the driver quickly agreed to take them back to the floating city. There, they hurried to the Jedi's starship. Leaving word for Meenon that Leed was safe, they took off for Rutan.

"I'm glad you are coming with me," Leed told Drenna. "This won't be a pleasant trip."

"I wouldn't let you go alone," Drenna said gently. "You need care."

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"I'd better contact your father," Qui-Gon told Leed. "There's no time to lose." Quickly, he accessed the comm unit and contacted King Frane. He told him that they were on their way to Rutan.

"I'll believe it when I face him on his own royal land," King Frane said, brusquely cutting the connection.

"So much for thank-yous," Obi-Wan muttered.

"He is still worried about his son," Qui-Gon said gently. "He hides his fear well."

"He hides his manners better," Obi-Wan replied.

They landed the craft on the palace grounds and made their way to see the king. He was pacing anxiously outside the Great Hall. When he saw Leed, his forbidding expression gave way to one of delight.

"Ha! I was afraid something would go wrong!

My son, my son!" King Frane hurried forward and hugged Leed. He let him go and mopped at his streaming eyes with the edge of his tunic. "How I missed you. Thank the stars you have come home."

"I came home to talk to you, Father," Leed said. "Not to stay."

Instantly, King Frane's face grew red. "Not to stay?" he shouted. "That's impossible! You are here. You will stay!"

"Father, can we talk without shouting?" Leed asked.

"I am not shouting!" King Frane bellowed. Then he lowered his voice. "It's just that I must speak up, because apparently nobody listens to me."

"I have listened to everything you and Taroon have said," Leed responded steadily. "I have tried to find a way to do my duty. But Father, I know that if I return it will break my heart. I can't rule this world — I don't know it. I don't love it the way I love Senali. You sent me there and made sure I was taken care of. You succeeded. I made a new family there. I belong there. But I assure you I don't mean to be a stranger to my blood family or to Rutan. Senali is close —"

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"It's close, but who wants to go there?" King Frane said furiously. "Obviously, you have been swayed by forces on Senali. I'm sure if you spend time on Rutan you will forget these foolish ideas."

"I will not forget them," Leed said, exasperated. "They are part of me."

King Frane visibly calmed himself, dropping his hands to his sides and taking a breath. "Leed, I must speak to you as a king as well as a father," he said in a voice that struggled to be steady. "I do not want to bully you into doing your duty. That is an option that is open to me as king. But as your father I prefer a more reasoned way. You will break my heart if you do this. You will kill my love for you."

"This is your way of reason?" Leed asked in astonishment.

"Hear me," King Frane said, holding up a hand. "Our family line has ruled for a hundred years. The firstborn child of the king or queen has taken his or her place without fail. Do you realize what you do when you break that chain? Do you take your responsibility to your family and your world so lightly? How can you decide at this young age what is right for the rest of your life?"

King Frane's words struck Obi-Wan as none had before. When he'd left the Jedi, he had not fully realized that he'd not only broken a bond between himself and Qui-Gon, but had violated a deep tradition between all Masters and Padawans. He had come to see how important his place in that tradition was.

Should Leed return to Senali and turn his back on generations who had prepared the way for him? Suddenly, Obi-Wan wasn't sure.

"You expect me to rule a year from now," Leed countered. "I will have to make such important decisions for all Rutanians. If you trust me to do that, you should trust my own mind now."

King Frane's temper grew, no matter how he tried to suppress it. "You turn your back on those Rutanians you speak of so lightly."

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"No," Leed said firmly. "I cannot be a good ruler. This I know. So I turn the honor aside to one more worthy."

"Your brother?" King Frane asked in disbelief. "Taroon is soft. He has no head for leadership. Who would follow him? As soon as he was picked up from that awful planet, I sent him back to school, where he belongs."

"You do not give him a chance," Leed said.

"I don't have to!" King Frane said, his voice rising again. "I am king! I choose! And I choose my firstborn, as my mother chose me, as my grandfather chose her!"

Leed did not answer. His mouth set stubbornly.

King Frane did not speak for a moment. Father and son faced each other. Neither flinched.

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon, but as usual the Jedi gave no clue as to what he was thinking. He was merely waiting for the situation to resolve itself as it would. He was so calm! Obi-Wan could feel the tension coiling inside him. He sought for the Jedi composure and could not find it. He could only find confusion.

At last King Frane spoke. "This discussion is over," he said stiffly. "I will not accept disloyalty and betrayal. You must take up your legacy. My son must rule after me. I am doing what is right for you."

"You can't make me do this," Leed said firmly.

King Frane's laughter had a harsh sound. Obi-Wan tried to listen as Qui-Gon would. He realized that the laughter was fueled by bewilderment and hurt, not contempt. "Of course I can! I am king!"

"What about Yaana?" Qui-Gon spoke up. "We have brought Leed to you. Now you must deliver your part of the bargain and free her."

"I made no bargain," King Frane said, his eyes glinting dangerously.

"But you did," Qui-Gon said steadily.

"Well, perhaps I did, but I am breaking it," King Frane said, watching Qui-Gon warily.

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"Yaana stays in custody until Leed agrees to begin royal training."

"So that is how you'll force me!" Leed cried. "You'll hold an innocent girl hostage! You are no better than a bully!"

King Frane's expression instantly changed to rage. "Yes, I will do this," he bellowed furiously. "Have you not been listening, you fool? I am king! I can do what I want. I know what is best for Rutan!"

King Frane stalked off, followed by his cluster of advisors and guards. Leed gazed after him, a look of disgust on his face.

"You see why I did not want to return?" he said. "He has found a way to keep me here against my will."

"So it appears," Qui-Gon said neutrally. "What do you mean?" Drenna asked.

"If we return Yaana to her father, King Frane has nothing to bargain with. He will have to face Leed as father to son, not king to subject."

"But she's in prison," Drenna objected.

"That is the difficulty," Qui-Gon agreed.

"Not necessarily," Leed said slowly. "I think I know how to break her out."

Chapter Thirteen

"I'll explain on the way," Leed said. "I know where Yaana is being held. Can we take your transport?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "Let's go."

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" Obi-Wan murmured to Qui-Gon as Leed and Drenna hurried ahead. "We're not supposed to break the laws of a planet."

"Well, we're with the prince," Qui-Gon observed. "Officially, he's now in royal training. We have his permission."

"But if we help Leed, we'll be taking sides," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"No, we're rescuing a hostage," Qui-Gon corrected. "King Frane has no right to hold Yaana in prison. She's only ten years old."

Obi-Wan fell silent. There were times when he had to struggle with Qui-Gon's decisions. His caution would lead him to choose a different way. But it was at such times that he was learning to let go and trust his Master. He knew that it was unjust to hold the girl.

"Don't worry, Padawan," Qui-Gon told him. "I am beginning to see how this situation can be resolved." He smiled. "We just have to break someone out of prison first."

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"That's all?" Obi-Wan said. He returned Qui-Gon's smile. Whenever they got out of rhythm, Qui-Gon managed to get them together again, either with a small joke or a gentle correction.

Obi-Wan jumped into the pilot seat of the starship. On Leed's direction, he punched in the coordinates for the landing platform on the outskirts of the city, close to the prison.

"So tell us why you think you have a way to rescue Yaana," Qui-Gon said to Leed as soon as they were under way.

"It was last summer on my visit," Leed began. "I was already trying to tell my father that I preferred Senali to Rutan. Of course he wouldn't listen. There was a grand hunt that day, and I refused to participate. So he threw me in prison."

Qui-Gon looked at him, startled. Drenna gasped.

Leed gave a faint smile. "Just for a day. He said it was for my royal training. So that I would know how Rutan treated its prisoners. It wasn't too bad. Of course everyone knew who I was, so I was given the best cell and no one mistreated me. But an interesting thing happened while I was there. A bird got into the exhaust system and began to fly around the place. It kept tripping the sensors. The guards could not seem to catch it or shoot it, and the sensors kept alerting the main system that a massive prison breakout was in progress. It took them awhile to figure out it was the bird — at first they thought the system had been triggered by a prisoner. But every time they checked out a sensor and did a cell check, everything was fine. The problem was that the system calls for an automatic notification to the king's guard when there is trouble at the prison. My father kept getting notification that a major breakout was going on, and then was told that it was nothing. The hunt was disrupted, and he was furious. They finally had to confess a bird was tripping it. He told the prison to turn off the system and catch the bird, or he'd fire every single one of them."

Drenna laughed. "I like the idea of one tiny creature causing all that trouble."

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Leed grinned at her. "I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it myself. They turned off the system until they caught the bird. Everyone forgot about me — I was in the warden's office, since they were about to release me. That's when I noticed something. When the guards change shifts, they remove their weapons belts if they are leaving and the guards on the new shift buckle on their own weapons belts. They do this in the weapons supply room, which is kept locked. When they shut the system down, the weapons supply room goes into automatic lockdown. That's in case there's a real breakout. They don't want the prisoners to get access to weapons."

Qui-Gon had already reached Leed's conclusion. "So if the system was shut down during a changeover, there would only be a reduced guard staff on duty with no access to additional weapons."

"Three guards per block, to be exact," Leed said, nodding. "It's a flaw in the system. I tried to tell my father upon my return, but... well, let's just say he wasn't in the mood to listen."

"I don't understand," Drenna said. "How can we get a bird to invade the system?"

Qui-Gon smiled. "We don't need a bird. I think Leed has an idea."

"When I arrived, they pretended I was a lawbreaker, just as my father wanted," Leed said, leaning forward with his excitement. "I was led to the booking area, then the holding cell. I had to pass at least ten to fifteen sensors during the whole process." Leed looked at Drenna. "Who has the best aim on Senali?"

"You do," she said promptly.

He shook his head, smiling. "Who tied for first place with me last year in the All-World Games?"

"I did," she said with a grin. "Almost beat you, too."

"You'll be our bird," he said. "All you need is this." He handed her a tiny dart shooter. "With some Jedi help, and a bit of bluffing on my part, I think we can bring this off. You can shoot

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darts at the sensors as you move through the hallways." He reached in a pocket of his tunic and withdrew some darts. They were tiny and made of transparent material. "These will stick in the wall, but no one will be able to see them."

"But how will we all get inside?" Drenna wondered.

Qui-Gon's eyes shone bright. "That's the easy part. We'll get arrested."

Leed split off from them as soon as they landed. He headed toward the prison. He would pretend to do a spot inspection as part of his royal training. King Frane had lost no time in announcing to the Rutanians that the prince had returned and would take up his legacy.

Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Drenna moved through the crowded streets of Testa. The buildings were carved of enormous blocks of stone in somber colors. The city had a teeming population, and in an effort to retain order there were strict controls on behavior. Qui-Gon felt it would be an easy task to get arrested. He had insisted on avoiding any violence or destruction of property. Instead, they merely needed to find an open park or plaza.

Drenna pointed ahead. "I see a place."

They made sure a pair of security police were nearby as they strolled through a plaza planted with green grass and shrubs. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan casually unfurled their survival tent and began to set up a condenser unit. Drenna unpacked some food.

Within minutes, the two security police appeared.

"What do you think you're doing?" "Cooking," Drenna said brightly.

"Loitering is against the law," one of them said. "So is cooking outdoors. Move along." "But we're hungry," Obi-Wan said.

"We won't be long," Drenna said.

Apparently Drenna's youth and winning smile had an effect. The tall Rutanian policeman looked at his companion, a female even taller than he was. They both shrugged.

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"End of my shift," the male murmured.

"I'm too tired for this," the female said. "If we arrest them, I won't be home for dinner."

"We didn't see you, okay?" the first one said, and turned away. "Just pack up and get lost."

The Jedi and Drenna exchanged surprised glances. They had thought this would be the easy part of their plan.

"We're staying," Drenna insisted quickly.

"And we're going to feed everyone in the park!" Obi-Wan added. "We brought plenty of food. We can stay until sunset."

Slowly, the two officers turned back.

The female sighed. "Are you going to make this hard or easy?"

Qui-Gon concentrated on her mind. "I guess you have to arrest us."

"I guess we have to arrest you," the officer said. "Stand up."

"Whew," Drenna said under her breath as she leaped to her feet. "I never thought I'd feel relieved to hear that."

They packed up their survival gear under the watchful eyes of the police. They were searched, but Qui-Gon used another Jedi mind trick to prevent the police from confiscating their lightsabers and Drenna's dart shooter, informing them to let them pass unhindered — a command the officers repeated dutifully. Then they were herded into the police landspeeder and transported to the prison.

As they passed through the gray durasteel gates, Obi-Wan watched as they slid shut behind them. A system of locks snapped shut in a series of loud clicks. Drenna swallowed.

"Are we sure this is a good idea?" she asked.

"It's too late now," Obi-Wan murmured.

"That's exactly what I mean," she said.

Chapter Fourteen

Once they got to the prison, they were marched to a booking desk.

"Charge?" the desk clerk asked the two security police.

"Loitering," the tall female said. "Can we do this one quickly, Neece? It's the end of our shift."

The guard looked at his timepiece. "Almost the end of mine, too. Long day. Names?"

Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Drenna gave their names. They were subjected to a retinal scan. The security police left and two guards were called.

"Escort the prisoners to the holding cell."

The clerk activated the security door and they marched through. The door clanged behind them and the locks snapped in with a final sound.

They headed down the hall between the guards. They had to pass through a number of checkpoints. The sensors glowed red over the open doorways. When the guards approached, they shot at the sensor with a laser pointer located at the tip of an electro-jabber. They were expert at timing their pace with the swing of the jabber in order to make it through the checkpoint smoothly.

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The guard on the left swung up his jabber and shot a beam of light at the sensor. It glowed green, but Drenna pretended to cough and brought her dart shooter to her mouth.

Her aim was perfect. The sensor went into a flashing mode, and an alarm sounded.

The guards looked around in surprise. The hallway was empty. The guard's comlink buzzed. "Guard seven, report in."

He spoke into the comlink. "Nothing here. Must be a malfunction. Check the system."

They continued walking. At the next sensor, Drenna set off the alarm before the guard could raise his jabber. The alarm sounded again.

"Guard seven, report in." This time the voice was annoyed.

"Again, it's nothing."

A groan came over the comlink. "Not another bird."

They passed through four sensors on the way to the holding cell. Drenna was so good at concealing the dart shooter that Qui-Gon did not even have to use the Force. The sensors went off, the alarm clanging.

The guards were clearly annoyed as they ushered the group into the holding cell. They led Drenna and the Jedi in and closed the durasteel door.

"Two minutes to shift change," Qui-Gon said softly.

Drenna put her eye to the small opening in the door. It was just big enough for her to aim the dart shooter. She aimed at the sensor across the hall.

The alarm clanged again.

"Why don't they shut it all down?" the guard outside complained, putting his hands over his ears. "All we need is to get the royal guard down here to investigate."

"Prince Leed is here," the other said. "The king will find out about this no matter what."

"Be quiet," the other muttered. "Here comes the warden. Let's head for our shift change before he tells us we have to stay."

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They heard the guards' footsteps receding and then, Leed's voice.

"I don't understand this," Leed said angrily. "Your system must be too sensitive. This has happened before. My father will be furious."

"Yes," the warden said nervously. "Perhaps another bird, or some sort of small creature, is triggering the system."

"It must be shut down at once!" Leed thundered, sounding like his father.

"But —"

"At once!"

The warden and Leed hurried away. Qui-Gon kept his eye on his timepiece, Obi-Wan on the sensor.

"The sensor just went off," Obi-Wan said. "The system has been shut down."

"And the guards are changing shifts. Time to go." Qui-Gon activated his lightsaber. Obi-Wan followed. Quickly, they cut a hole in the durasteel door. Then the three of them climbed through.

The hallway was empty, but it wouldn't be for long. They raced down the hall. Leed had told them the location of the high security cell where Yaana would most likely be held.

The system was off, but there was now a guard outside Yaana's cell. His blaster was in his holster. No doubt he was not nervous about a ten-year-old girl making an escape attempt.

Drenna blew a paralyzing dart at the guard. It landed in his neck. He toppled over, a surprised look on his face.

Drenna leaned over. "You'll be able to move in twenty minutes," she told him in a friendly way. "Just relax and enjoy the chance to rest."

Meanwhile, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon swiftly cut a hole in the door. The metal peeled back, and they climbed inside. A slender Senali girl with large dark eyes sat in a corner. She shrank back when she saw the Jedi.

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"Yaana, don't be afraid. We have come to take you back to your father on Senali," Qui-Gon told her.

The apprehensive look faded. She raised her chin and nodded. "I am ready."

They ran down the hall. When they reached a turning, Qui-Gon held up a hand. He peered around the corner. Leed was shouting at the warden in a good imitation of his father. When he saw Qui-Gon, he quickly swiveled the warden around by the shoulder so that he would not see them. He made a quick hand motion behind the warden's back to indicate a door near him.

Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Drenna, and Yaana moved silently down the hall. Qui-Gon walked to the doorway that Leed had indicated. It led to another long gray hall. This one was lined with closed office doors. They were now in the administrative section of the prison.

A console desk was directly ahead of them. It was the checkpoint to leave the prison. Qui-Gon strode forward.

"We are authorized visitors with an exit pass signed by the warden," he said. He concentrated on the guard's mind. "We may go."

"You may go," the guard said, activating the door.

Walking casually, the four strolled past the checkpoint and out the door. They quickened their pace as they passed through the yard. When they hit the streets of Testa, Drenna began to hurry, but Qui-Gon stopped her.

"Do not attract attention," he said.

They were almost to the platform when Leed caught up to them.

"So far, so good," he said. "But I'm afraid the warden put in a call to my father to apologize for the disturbance when it first started. He could be here any minute."

"Now you can hurry," Qui-Gon told Drenna.

They ran down the last section toward the landing platform. Their transport sat waiting. The landing platform was deserted.

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Suddenly Obi-Wan sensed danger. *This is a public landing platform. Why is it deserted?* he wondered.

He and Qui-Gon activated their lightsabers in one simultaneous motion. Qui-Gon pushed Yaana toward a stack of container boxes. "Get behind them," he ordered crisply.

In the next split second, blaster fire erupted from around the corner of a tech shed. The ship was peppered with blasts.

They rushed forward, lightsabers activated. A row of guard droids was emptying weaponry into the transport. Blaster fire hit the fuel tank, and it went up in an explosion.

Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Drenna, and Leed went after the droids. Drenna's exceptional crossbow aim sent three of the droids smoking within seconds. Leed fired just as rapidly with his own crossbow, taking down two droids. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon leaped and tumbled as one unit, lightsabers a blur of motion, to behead the rest.

"Well done," a familiar voice said.

They turned to see King Frane standing with the royal guard. "A pleasure to watch, in fact." He glanced at Drenna with admiration. "I've never seen such good shooting. Who would think a Senali could be such a good shot?"

One of King Frane's nek battle dogs suddenly leaped forward, barking, with its long, deadly teeth bared.

"Back!" the king called to the ferocious dog.

Drenna stepped forward before anyone could stop her. She held out a hand, and the dog quieted, then sniffed her. Qui-Gon had never seen a nek battle dog react in a friendly fashion. By the look on his face, neither had King Frane. Drenna scratched the nek behind the ears.

"You're not a killer. Just misunderstood," she cooed.

"Tell that to a kudana," King Frane said. "Now, where is Meenon's daughter?"

Qui-Gon stepped in front of Yaana, who had emerged from behind the boxes. "We will not let you take her again," he told

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King Frane. "The Jedi are here at your request. They will not stand by and watch you violate diplomatic law."

King Frane stared him down. "Foolish words. I decide the law on Rutan."

"No, Father." Leed stepped forward. "There is no need to threaten my friends the Jedi. I see I have no choice. I will stay on Rutan."

"At last you see your duty," King Frane said, satisfied.

"Are you sure, Leed?" Qui-Gon asked. "I promised you that we would not allow your father to force you to remain here."

Leed shook his head. "I am not forced. I see now that my legacy is a burden I must accept. Not to do so would be selfish. Perhaps my father was right about that."

"Perhaps?" King Frane asked irritably. "Of course I'm right!"

"And you will allow us to take Yaana back to Senali?" Qui-Gon asked the king.

King Frane shook his head. "Then I will have no Senalis here. I need leverage with Meenon. No. She remains."

"Meenon has set his conditions to avoid war," Qui-Gon said. "One of them is the return of his daughter. I do not think Leed remaining here will change that. Once you threw his daughter in prison, he ceased trusting you."

"Let him attack! What do I care? We will pulverize them!" King Frane cried angrily.

Drenna stepped forward. "Send Yaana home. I will remain."

King Frane looked at her curiously. "And who are you, besides being such a good shot?"

"I am Drenna, Meenon's niece," Drenna said. "I am loved by him, too. If I remain, he will not attack Rutan."

"I am not afraid of his attack," King Frane said scornfully. He eyed her. "Still, it is a solution. All right. I accept."

"You will not imprison her?" Qui-Gon asked warningly.

"No. She will live on the royal grounds, where I can keep an eye on her," King Frane said with satisfaction, turning back to Drenna. "I will install you in the hunting lodge. You'll be under

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my watchful eye, unable to escape, but not imprisoned. Maybe you will teach my royal guard how to aim. And take care of my neks. Taroon was in charge of care of all my trackers. He was afraid of the neks and never could fix the droids. I'm sure you can't be worse. I will call Taroon from school and send him back to Senali." King Franc stamped his foot. "There, we have a trade once more. Are you satisfied, Jedi?"

"Taroon goes to Senali?" Drenna asked. "But he hates it there!"

King Franc shrugged. "Good. Then I know he will return."

He turned abruptly. "All is over. Now, it's time for the hunt. Come, Leed."

Leed walked closer to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. He placed a hand on each of their forearms. Sadness was on his face, but he nodded at them in a dignified way. "I will never forget all you tried to do for me."

"You may call on us again if you need us," Qui-Gon said.

"I am sorry, Leed," Obi-Wan said.

"Duty is more important than feelings," Leed said. "That is what I must learn. I wish you ease and serenity."

He left them to join his father. With a sad glance of good-bye at the Jedi, Drenna joined them. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stood watching them go.

"At least Drenna will be here for a time," Obi-Wan observed. "That will give Leed great comfort. The mission hasn't ended as I thought it would. Somehow I thought Leed would be allowed to remain on Senali."

"Is that what you hoped would happen, Padawan?" Qui-Gon asked. "This time you must tell me the truth."

So Qui-Gon had known he had evaded his question back on Senali. "At first I did not want to tell you that I sympathized with Leed," Obi-Wan admitted. "I thought it would remind you of my decision to stay on Melida/Daan and leave the Jedi. I thought it might give you pause about my commitment to you."

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"We have put that matter behind us, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "Do not be afraid to share your feelings with me. I would never hold them against you."

"My feelings seemed to change from day to day," Obi-Wan admitted. "When King Franc spoke to Ibis son, I was moved by his argument, too."

"That is because there is no clear answer," Qui-Gon said. "Emotions are tangled, as I said in the beginning."

"Well, there won't be a war," Obi-Wan said in conclusion. "I'm sorry for Leed. But at least the planets remain peaceful."

"You are wrong, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, his eyes on the king's transport as it rose in the air. "The mission is not over. And I fear the two worlds are closer to war than ever."

Chapter Fifteen

Obi-Wan hurried to catch up to Qui-Gon's long stride. The tall Jedi moved purposefully through the crowded streets of Testa.

"But I don't understand," Obi-Wan said. "Why are we close to war? Both leaders got their children back. There is no reason for them to fight. "

"It is not them who still wants war," Qui-Gon said. "It was a Rutanian force that kidnapped Leed."

"How do you know?"

"Think back, Padawan," Qui-Gon said as he skirted a food seller. "Was there anything in their camp that could tell you where they came from?"

Obi-Wan focused his mind. He remembered the kidnappers sleeping in the trees. He had immediately assumed they were Senali because of their silvery skin and coral necklaces and headpieces. Except they didn't have silvery skin. He had just assumed that they did.

"Their skin was smeared with clay," he said. "I thought it was because they wanted to look fierce. But it could conceal the fact that they didn't have tiny scales on their skin."

"Good," Qui-Gon approved. "Anything else?"

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Obi-Wan thought back to the battle. The kidnappers had fought well, but there was nothing to indicate whether they were Senali or Rutanians. Both groups used crossbows and dart shooters as weapons.

He turned his attention to the boat. It had looked like many other boats he'd seen on Senali. It was fashioned from the trunk of one of the native trees. He remembered the supplies raining down from it

"The breathing tubes," he exclaimed. "Senali don't use them. Why didn't I think of that before?"

"We have not had much time for reflection," Qui-Gon said kindly. "I noticed it, but I had already questioned why they had smeared their skin with that white clay."

"But if you knew they were Rutanians, why didn't you say something?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Because I didn't know who was behind the kidnapping yet," Qui-Gon said. "Until I did, I thought it better to seem to think what I was meant to think."

"So who *is* behind it?" Obi-Wan asked, frustrated. "And where are we going now?"

"We are going to see Taroon," Qui-Gon said.

"But he is probably on his way to Senali," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"Not yet. He will find a reason to delay."

Obi-Wan still felt confused. "You think Taroon was behind the kidnapping of his brother? But why? He came to persuade him to return to Rutan for good. He was angry and hurt when Leed refused."

"Or so he seemed. But Padawan, what beings say and what they feel are not necessarily the same. Jedi are different that way."

"Are you afraid that Taroon is planning an attack?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon nodded. "I saw something else in the supplies at the kidnappers' camp. Seeker droids. They had the royal crest of Rutan on them. And King Frane just told us that Taroon was

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keeper of his trackers, remember? Only one person could have had access to those droids and the power to gather supporters for a secret invasion of Senali."

"Why would Taroon steal the royal seeker droids?" Obi-Wan asked. He was growing frustrated.

"That is a very good question, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "Why, since seeker droids are so readily available? It only makes sense if Taroon modified the droids in some way. Then he planned to send them back to Rutan."

"And what happens then?"

"That is something Taroon must tell us," Qui-Gon answered gravely.

Obi-Wan saw that they had stopped outside the gates of an impressive structure. ROYAL SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP was carved in stone over the archway.

Qui-Gon strode through the archway and pushed open the door to the school. The hallway was empty except for a teacher hurrying past, his arms filled with datapads and readout screens.

"Excuse me," Qui-Gon said politely. "We are looking for Taroon."

The teacher frowned. "He is on his way to Senali, most likely. His father gave the order to leave immediately. Pity. He is a popular student. He'll be missed."

"We have reason to believe he has not left yet," Qui-Gon said. "Is there anyplace you can think of that he might be?"

"That's easy," the teacher said with a smile. "Taroon is usually in the tech room with his friends, tinkering with program boards. It's down that hall, up the ramp, second door on the right."

Qui-Gon thanked him and they moved quickly in the direction the teacher had indicated.

"If you're right, what makes you think Taroon will confess to you?" Obi-Wan asked Qui-Gon.

"Because he is not bad," Qui-Gon said. "Merely hurt. He is like his father — he turns his hurt to anger."

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They came to the tech room and activated the door. Taroona sat on a long bench against the wall. He looked up at the Jedi nervously and jumped to his feet.

"Has anything happened?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?" Qui-Gon queried.

Taroona shrugged, but his eyes were wary. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"Your father has sent an order for you to leave for Senali immediately," Qui-Gon said. "Why do you remain?"

"I had left some equipment here," Taroona said quickly. "I need to include it in my packing so I can be on my way."

"You weren't packing when we came in," Obi-Wan pointed out.

Taroona gave him a haughty look. "Who are you to question a prince?"

"He is a Jedi," Qui-Gon said firmly. "Your father called us here to help settle this matter. It is not settled, is it, Taroona?"

"I don't know what you mean," the young man said nervously.

"Taroona, we don't have time for evasions," Qui-Gon said. "I think you were behind your brother's kidnapping on Senali."

"That's ridiculous!" Taroona cried. "Why would I arrange such a thing? I love my brother. I am a patriot!"

"Both of those things are true," Qui-Gon said. "You love your brother, but you are also angry at him for turning his back on you. You are a patriot, but you would arrange an attack on Rutan in hopes Leed would be blamed. But Leed is here, Taroona. I doubt the king will blame him. He will blame Meenon. Maybe he will retaliate, and a war will result. But perhaps you don't care about that. Perhaps you think such an event would tear Lead in two. Perhaps you want this."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I do know there will not be a war," Taroona said. "My father talks and talks, but he will not attack. Anyway, I had nothing to do with any of this."

"You know your father will not attack Senali for sure? You are willing to gamble lives on it?" Qui-Gon questioned, his tone

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growing in intensity. Obi-Wan did not think he could have withstood such a piercing gaze.

Taroon's glance slid away. "You can't talk to me this way."

Qui-Gon strolled farther into the room. "Let me tell you what I think happened," he said. "You enlisted a small group of Rutanians. Perhaps they are friends of yours at school, a mix of those who are close to you and those who hope to benefit should you become king instead of Leed. While you remained on Rutan, this group secretly traveled to Senali and established a ghostly identity, just enough to alert Meenon of their presence. They smeared themselves with clay so that no one would be able to see that their skin wasn't scaled. They stole things or violated sacred places so that different clans would grow angry with one another. They fostered unrest to gain attention and dislike among Senali. All of this you planned."

Sweat beaded up on Taroon's forehead. "You can't prove anything."

"You arranged to kidnap Leed because during his disappearance you would arrange an attack on Rutan. You wanted him as the leader of the Ghost Ones to be blamed. Even though Leed escaped, you decided to continue with the plan. Evidence will point to Leed as the one who orchestrated the attack. This will serve to banish Leed from Rutan forever — and won't make him terribly popular on Senali, either, as the Ghost Ones will suddenly disappear. The Senalis will blame Leed, too. He will be left with no world at all. No supporters. And you will become king. Isn't that right, Taroon? You betrayed your brother for your own ambition."

"Not ambition! Love for my planet!" Taroon burst out. "Leed is right. He is not the true ruler of Rutan. Doesn't he deserve what will happen? He turned his back on us long ago! He is my brother. He should have thought of his family. He should have thought about me. I grew up without him. I had to withstand the rages of our father. He grew up with care and love. I grew up with neglect!"

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"Your father is many things, but you cannot say he does not love his sons," Qui-Gon said gravely. "Perhaps he does not see you as the strong young man you are."

"He does not see me at all," Taroon muttered.

"It must be hard to be called a fool by your father," Qui-Gon said. "Your anger is understandable. But you are feeding your anger instead of seeking to conquer it. If you faced your father and spoke your truth to him, the situation could change. Instead, you strike out like a child. The difference is that you are a prince, and the result of your anger will be war."

"There won't be a war. Just an attack. No lives will be lost," Taroon said sullenly. "I picked a symbolic target."

"How will it occur?" Qui-Gon asked urgently. _ "Is it the seeker droids?"

Taroon nodded reluctantly. "The squad on Senali is returning to Rutan. They will release the droids. I have already made sure the droids my father will use on the hunt will malfunction. The new droids will take their place and no one will notice."

"And what will the seeker droids do?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Instead of searching out kudana, they have been programmed to hone in on the nek dog kennels. The kennel has no roof and is open to the sky. When the droids locate their prey, they are programmed to blow apart. In a confined space like the kennels, the dogs will be destroyed."

Taroon shifted uncomfortably under their scrutiny. "What is so terrible? The neks are horrible creatures. They attack anything, even their own kind."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said softly. "Attacking one's own kind is truly despicable."

Taroon's blue skin turned an angry red. He understood Qui-Gon's point: that he himself had turned against his brother.

"This attack will be enough to enrage your father," Qui-Gon said. "And he will suspect Leed. If he does not, you will plant the idea in his head. That's why you remain here and do not leave for Senali. But what about Drenna?"

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Taroon looked at him sharply. "What about her? She is back on Senali. "

Qui-Gon shook his head. "She remained on Rutan. Your father has installed her in the hunting lodge."

Taroon jumped up. "But the lodge is next to the kennels!"

Qui-Gon nodded. "And her job is to take care of the animals. She could be in the kennels right now.

"No!" Taroon cried. "It is too late to bring back the seeker droids! We have to stop them!"

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. "Perhaps we can prevent what you have set in motion."

"We can use my transport," Taroon said. "Follow me."

Chapter Sixteen

Taroon sat at the console, leaning forward as if he could force the transport to go faster. Qui-Gon sat still and calm. As always, Obi-Wan admired his Master's ability to locate his own serenity in the middle of a tense situation.

"I'm confused again," Obi-Wan said, leaning closer to Qui-Gon and speaking in a low voice. "I thought Taroon hated Drenna. Why should knowing she is in danger make a difference to him?"

Qui-Gon gave a short smile. "Remember what I told you at the start of the mission, Padawan. Words do not always echo feelings. You saw two enemies. I saw two young beings fighting an attraction they knew was inappropriate."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "I did not see that at all."

"Do not fret," Qui-Gon said serenely. "Perhaps if you were older, you would have. In any event, there are things you see that I do not. Such is the nature of the effective Master-Padawan team."

"I hope we reach Drenna in time," Obi-Wan said.

"Here we are," Taroon called in a relieved voice. "I don't see anything. Maybe the hunt was called off."

"Just land the ship," Qui-Gon said, his keen eyes searching the area.

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Obi-Wan joined him, scanning the horizon in all directions as Taroona flew lower. Obi-Wan saw a flicker of something in the distant sky.

"There," he murmured to Qui-Gon.

"Yes," Qui-Gon said in a low tone. "Set this down quickly, Taroona," he called in a calm tone. Obi-Wan knew he did not want to panic the young man.

"There's Drenna!" Taroona called, momentarily distracted. "She's heading out from the woods."

Drenna strode out from the woods, her crossbow strapped to her back. Obi-Wan quickly glanced at the flickering dots to his left. Now he could see they were unmistakably seeker droids — perhaps a dozen of them. Silently, he pointed them out to Qui-Gon. He knew from experience how quickly those droids could track.

Drenna looked up and saw the transport. She shaded her eyes from the sun, but could not see inside. She headed for the kennels.

"No!" Taroona shouted. The transport wobbled as his hands shook.

Qui-Gon vaulted forward. He took the controls from Taroona and in a series of swift, practiced moves, landed the craft in the field adjoining the kennels. He activated the landing ramp.

"Hurry, Padawan," he urged.

They raced down the ramp, their lightsabers activated and ready.

Drenna was almost to the door of the kennels. The seeker droids flashed as they zoomed toward the target.

"Drenna!" Qui-Gon shouted. "Overhead! Watch out!"

Drenna's reflexes were keen. She turned, already looking overhead. She barely paused to register the threat before sweeping her arm back to bring her crossbow to her shoulder.

Qui-Gon took a dazzling leap into the air, his lightsaber a bright green glow against the gray sky. He smashed at the lowest

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seeker droid. The lightsaber sailed through it, cutting it in half. A small explosion sent a puff of smoke rising in the air. As long as the seeker droids did not hit the ground, they would not emit a full explosion.

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon with his own leap. He could not get the same height as Qui-Gon, and his first swipe met empty air. But Drenna had already loaded her crossbow and let the first laser arrow fly. It connected, and another droid smoked and sizzled as it crashed to the ground.

Qui-Gon leaped up on the low flat roof of the entrance to the kennels. From here he could move from side to side, taking down the droids as they honed in on the kennel. He could hear the dogs snarling in the open kennels as the droids came closer.

Obi-Wan leaped up to join him. Drenna stayed on the ground, her crossbow at her shoulder, firing so fast her arm was a blur as she fitted arrow after arrow against the bow. Obi-Wan leaped and brought a droid down in a sky-to-ground sweep, then reversed direction and brought down another.

The noise of galloping huds came to them, and Obi-Wan saw the king and the royal party racing toward them. He ignored them, returning his attention to the droids overhead. They were relentless machines, honing in on their target.

One by one, the Jedi and Drenna brought down the droids. There was only one left, diving and spinning toward the kennels. They heard a pop, and the droid began to smoke. Taroon had brought it down with a blaster.

The four of them dropped their weapons to their sides. Drenna wiped the sweat off her forehead with the sleeve of her tunic.

"Would you mind telling me what that was about? And what are you doing here?" she asked Taroon.

"I should ask the same question!" King Frane cried, leaping off his hud and stamping toward them. "Why are my droids here instead of tracking kudana? And why did you destroy them?" His

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fierce eyes raked the Jedi. "I forgave you once. What makes you think I would do so again?"

"I think it's time you explained, Taroon," Qui-Gon said, giving him a meaningful glance.

"I was very angry," Taroon said to his father. "And I thought... if Leed throws away what I want so much, why shouldn't I have it? Why should he be forced to take a prize I covet?"

"You want to rule?" King Frane asked, dumbfounded.

"Yes, Father, I want to rule," Taroon said. "Even though I am the younger brother, and clumsy and weak in your eyes. Even though I am not nearly as good at everything as your firstborn. I knew the only way to get what I wanted was to make it happen. So when Leed began to hint that he wanted to stay on Senali, I saw what would happen. I knew he was heading for a clash of wills. I knew he would not break down, that you would underestimate his stubbornness. So I gathered a group of supporters and sent them to Senali to pose as a fringe clan. My plan was that both Rutanians and Senalis would think that Leed led this fringe clan. I planned the attack with the seeker droids so that all would think that Leed was responsible. War would be threatened, but I did not think it would occur. Leed would stay on Senali. That was before the Jedi got involved." Taroon gave a weak smile at Qui-Gon. "They spoiled all my plans."

King Frane stared at his son in disbelief. "You planned to attack your own planet?"

"No lives would be lost," Taroon insisted. "Only nek battle dogs, and they are of no consequence."

"They are living creatures!" Drenna broke in angrily.

"They eat their own kind! They are bred to destroy," Taroon said. "A few less of them won't make a difference."

"Would you destroy any creature to get your own way?" Drenna asked scornfully. "Is that why you almost destroyed me?"

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"I am truly sorry for that," Taroona said, turning to her. "The hunting lodge has been uninhabited for fifteen years. I had no idea you were here."

"Your apology would not mean much to me if I were dead," Drenna shot back.

"Will you two stop?" King Frane roared. "I am the injured party here! My kennels were almost destroyed! And you," he said to Taroona. "Do you mean to tell me that you recruited a squad, invaded a planet, and formed a plan to incriminate your brother in order to rule?"

Taroona nodded.

King Frane froze for a moment. Then he tossed back his head and suddenly broke into a shout of laughter. "How do you like that! He is a leader! Such treachery! Such wiles! You will make a fine ruler. Am I not wise, to raise such a son?" He pounded Taroona on the back. "All you lack is a queen who will fight with you every day, as your beloved mother did with me. What a warrior she was!" He eyed Drenna. "Well, perhaps if you are lucky you will find such a queen nearby."

Drenna looked away, her cheeks flaming as her blue skin flushed with pink. Taroona was equally red. Leed looked from one to the other, a look of surprise on his face. Then, slowly, he smiled.

"Perhaps there will someday be a way for Senalis and Rutanians to be at peace, after all," he said.

"And us, brother?" Taroona asked, turning to Leed. "Are we at peace? Do you forgive me?"

Leed grasped both of Taroona's forearms in a gesture of affection. "I understand and forgive you, brother."

King Frane's eyes misted, and he cleared his throat noisily. "I, too, would like peace. Already I am tired of these threats and counter threats with Meenon. It interferes with hunting and feasting. I say Leed will be the first ambassador for both worlds. He will foster understanding and trade between the two of us."

Jude Watson

"That is a wonderful idea, Father," Leed said, joy entering his voice. "And you will allow me to leave Rutan?"

King Frane waved his hand dismissively. "I am also weary of your sighing and your constant sorrow. It has been very depressing to have you around." He beamed at his two sons. "Now I see that I have two sons who are growing to manhood unafraid of taking what they want. I have done well." He turned to the Jedi. "I forgive you for destroying my droids. Again! Am I not generous? And I invite you to my feast."

Qui-Gon bowed. "We would be honored."

The next day, the Jedi took off with Leed in a transport that King Frane insisted on giving them to replace the starship he had destroyed.

The blue-green world of Senali glittered as they flew closer. They landed and walked with Leed back to his home. The Banoosh-Walore clan spilled out of their home and raced toward Leed, crying out their love and welcome. He instantly disappeared in a flurry of hugs and embraces.

"I thought I had already learned what I needed to know about how personal happiness can conflict with duty," Obi-Wan said, watching Leed. "At first I thought Leed should remain here. Then I thought just as strongly that he should return to his own world. And now I feel that he belongs here after all." Obi-Wan sighed. "I spent much of this mission in a state of confusion."

"That is good, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "It means you are learning."

"When I think about how I left the Jedi order, the memory is so painful," Obi-Wan said slowly. "It's hard not to feel discouraged that I have so much more to learn."

"It should not be cause for discouragement," Qui-Gon said gently. "Life is both learning and relearning. You can confront the same issue over and over, and find a deeper meaning each time. The learning deepens, and that is what nourishes us. You should take comfort in the fact that life will always surprise you."

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You taught me after Melida/Daan that my own ideas needed to expand. I have my own lessons to learn."

"Well, it is good to hear that you don't know everything," Obi-Wan told his Master with a smile.

"Not nearly, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "Not nearly enough, I suspect. Even with sureness, there must be doubt. It is the Jedi way."

End of Volume Two
Continued In Volume Three

About the Author

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.